

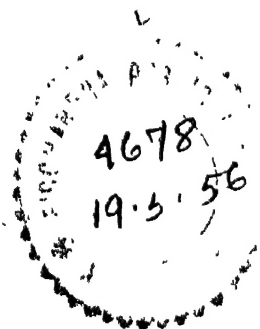
THE VIOLENT WEDDING

PARIS "BABY" JAMES was a negro fighter who fought to win and won to be paid. Laine Brendan, the white girl who loved him, was an artist, and to her Baby was a black angel of death, a gliding and dancing statue who made blood and pain beautiful with savage grace. She painted him that way—a lurid picture of a black face in a puzzle behind a crisscross of grays and ring ropes and blood. The painting fascinated Baby James, but it scared him—scared him the way Laine did with her vision of him and her crazy, wild-eyed devotion. But he couldn't break clean from her or her vision—even when he battled for his life under the glaring spotlights in the ring. Violent tragedy marks the final chapters of this novel written with all the impact of a left to the jaw.

THE VIOLENT WEDDING



by
Robert Lowry



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The characters and events in this story may seem familiar to a lot of people. Nevertheless, both are fictitious, and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

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TO
RODION RATHBONE

I

TO GET THERE, you took the Tunnel or the George Washington Bridge across the river and drove through that vast, flat, clapboard-and-brick suburb of Manhattan that was eastern New Jersey, where a dozen characterless little industrial towns named Jersey City and Newark and Passaic and Paterson had expanded and grown into each other until for twenty miles in from the Hudson the whole area looked like an endless succession of garish roadhouses, overpowering supermarkets, mammoth drive-in theatres, used-car lots, junk yards, and main streets that had all the sooty drabness but none of the vertical grandeur of streets in the big town.

Beyond Paterson it got better, there were whole stretches along the highway where the billboards didn't block out the countryside, and now and then even trees grew. But as you got closer to the mountains and lakes and reservoirs, the summer resorts took over—piano-crate cabins and hotdog stands and come-on signs with huge arrows (STOP AT WANNAREST! LAZY LOU'S FOR LAZY DAYS. SWIM AND BOAT AT JAKE'S BUDGET CABINS—RUNNING WATER) fungused more thickly with every mile. Until at last you began to climb, up into the steep mountains that circled the lake, and at turns in the road the lake itself came in view.

It was boxing country now—private camps and public boxing hotels like the Long Pond Inn and Brown's and Gleason's. The big deal was the camp at Pompton Lakes, closer to New York; the Bomber used to train there. But Baby liked this place. He liked the privacy. He liked it because it was his—his and Louie's. Half 'n Half, they called it. "It's half Louie's and half fallin' down," Baby had kidded once. It was shabby and remote and the best place to train he knew.

They climbed more steeply, up into the clean, cold, snowless air. Baby cased the car around a final vertical curve, stepped on the gas, and saw his camp at last, sitting up there high above the road, the gym the cabin closest to the road, the living quarters the cabin behind it. He passed the sign that named the place Half'n Half and swung up and around into the parking lot between the two cabins, pulling in beside an old blue heap, a '38 Oldsmobile, that belonged to Doc Stacy and that Doc and Tree Top had driven up yesterday, to help Spunky Rowles get the camp aired out and warmed up before Baby came.

Baby rolled up his window and got out on the driver's side while Louie and Ronnie got out on the other side.

"None of us chickens in there," Baby said, pressing his face close to the dusty window-pane of the gym cabin. There was a white enamel coffee-pot in the middle of a table and a deck of cards splattered across the table. There was the space heater, the couple of broken chairs that didn't invite sitting down, the sparring ring, and beyond the sparring ring the rub-down table, the row of scarred metal lockers, the punching bags—all obscured in dust and winter shadows.

"Looks like a haunted house," Baby said, turning away. He was in a real good mood. Leaving the city, the uneasy feeling that the city gave him ever since he'd met that crazy girl, was just what he needed. He felt clean again. The thought of the four weeks he was going to spend up here made him feel clean. "Where is everybody?" Baby asked.

"Here comes somebody," Ronnie said.

They heard Spunky Rowles' big flat feet scraping toward the door, more slowly than they had shuffled toward an opponent across a hundred prize rings ten or fifteen years ago. Spunky's eyes were going; he squinted and didn't recognize them at first. Then his mouth broke into that wide-open, silver-toothed grin. He held open the screendoor that he hadn't bothered to take down and store away last fall.

"Doc and Tree Top thought you come tonight," Spunky said. "They went in Sonny Boy's car down to Clayborn's camp. They be back for supper."

"Where's Teddy?" Louie asked.

"Teddy went with them."

"Nobody botherin about training around here?" Louie said. He was mad—like a second looey who comes in and finds all his dog robbers and KPs taking their ease. "He wish he trained when he tangles with that boy he's fighting Friday."

"Did some roadwork this morning," Spunky Rowles said. "Only they find out Bimmy is down at Clayborn's, so they figure to hurry on down and see him. . . . You all want some coffee? I got some made here."

Louie and Ronnie and Spunky took coffee sitting around the kitchen table, but Baby didn't want any coffee.

Howent into his room and changed clothes. He had a room and Louie had a room and Spunky who stayed all year round had a little room, and then there was a big room with half a dozen bunks in it where anybody else who was around could sleep—like Teddy Alonzo and Sonny Boy Harriot, two of Louie's boys. The camp was like a miniature version of an army boot-camp that Baby could remember—the big fish, the officers, all with their private rooms, and the little fish, the GIs, all thrown into one big room together. Only here it was different. He was a big fish here. He had the best room.

It hung right out over the edge of the mountain, about to fall off, and looked across miles of brown countryside and the lake. It had one photograph in it, framed, that was a picture of Baby's mother and that stood on the table by the iron army cot under the window, where he slept. He didn't really like this picture because the Harlem photographer who had taken it had thrown some kind of fancy lighting around on her to make her look lighter than she was, an old trick of Harlem photographers. On the far wall, where Baby saw it every morning when he woke up, was a yellow poster that said *Wednesday September 24 Detroit Olympia Paris "Baby" James Leading Middleweight Contender Vs. "Irish" Joe Balton Former World's Middleweight Champion 10 Rounds*, and close-ups of him and Balton taken slightly from above and leaning into the camera the way most fighters' pictures were taken. It was his convincer fight—knocking out Balton in three rounds and getting tagged "uncrowned" middleweight champ. But two years was a long time to wait to get rid of the "uncrowned" part of it.

He went out to the kitchen wearing a grass-green

turtleneck sweater and GI suntan pants and sneakers. The coffee cups were stacked on the sink and a poker game was going on. He noticed how Spunky Rowles held the cards close up to his fading eyes—maybe the punches had done it. From the looks of the shiny layer of scar tissue that covered those flattened brows, Spunky must have taken a lot of head punches in his day. He was that old campaigner, a little blind, a little punchy, who was around every boxing camp and gym that Baby had ever seen—your future if you didn't look out.

He noticed too the kind of tenseness that came over Ronnie whenever he played poker. He played like an angry man, staring first at the cards, then at the pot, then at the cards again; never showing by any sign that there were other people playing with him. Louie was relaxed. He leaned back on two legs of his kitchen chair playing an easy-does-it game, his shirt-collar unbuttoned and his heavy underlip stuck out in contemplation of his cards. Yet of the two of them it was Ronnie that Baby liked better. He liked somebody who played for blood, all the way. It seemed to him that this kind of playing was the only thing that made it clean and justified—no matter what it was, fighting or laying a woman or poker, you had to lose yourself in it or it all became flabby and dirty and nothing. Standing there watching the game, Baby felt maybe that was the reason he wanted to get out of the whole thing with that crazy girl. Because they were involved in *her* big moment, not his. Because it was all going nowhere, and he knew it if she didn't.

He had come in so quietly, the way he always came into a room, that nobody noticed him. He stood there by the stove looking not like the star and the owner of this.

camp but like some anonymous kibitzer who had just wandered in out of the cold. Swaybacked, loose-jointed, nonchalant, he regarded the three of them with that faint ironic grin that was the mark of his face. Then he pulled a chair out from the wall, and the scraping brought their three heads up.

"Yeah, I forgot to tell you something," Spunky said, blinking as if somebody had just poked a flashlight in his eyes. "They was a call for you bout an hour ago."

Baby waited for him to say more, but when he didn't he said: "Yeah So?"

Spunky had a funny look. "That's all," he said. "They called and I said you wasn't here and they said they call again."

"I guess they didn't have a name or they'd have said it."

Spunky looked down at his cards. "I don't know bout that. It was some downtown woman is all I know."

Baby felt his heart start up; and at the same time he found himself looking at Ronnie. He imagined Ronnie's eyes were slightly narrowed, like an accuser's eyes. He wished to hell he hadn't cornered Spunky into saying that last thing. That last thing was the giveaway.

He pulled open the door and felt the cold outdoors rush in on him.

"Where you going?" Louie called.

"Gym," Baby said, and slammed the door behind him. He was all churned up inside. He guessed he was, after all, half-way something or other with that crazy girl. He guessed he'd better try to explain it to himself some more. It needed explaining before he could go on, cool and alone, a fighter who didn't make the mistakes that all around him, every day, were waiting to get him.

A quarter of a mile above the camp, the road that had been climbing so steeply levelled out to a gentle curving slope that ran for four miles along the ridge of the mountain and that was the place where Baby and whoever else was training with Baby did their roadwork.

Bundled up in a stocking cap, a sweatshirt, a thick wool sweater, and ankle-length gray wool sweat pants, he was out there next morning at six-thirty, Teddy Alonzo and Sonny Boy Harriot with him. They trotted along the lefthand gutter in single file, first Baby, then Sonny Boy, then Teddy, their fists held in close to their chest squeezing sponge-rubber balls to strengthen them, their heads angled back, their breath streaming behind them like three ghostly flags. It was a cold morning, below freezing, but after the first half mile Baby began to feel warm. He felt the sweat burn under his arms and run down his ribs.

Baby was the oldest of the three, the tallest, the slenderest. He had a neck—something Teddy Alonzo, a twenty-three-year-old middleweight who was growing so fast that in the past three years he'd changed his weight-class twice, didn't happen to have. Down at the Happy Hour pool-room they called Teddy "Wide Boy": he had the broadest shoulders in Harlem, and that mauve colouring that a white father and a negro mother sometimes breed. His bulletheaded sullenness only accented Sonny Boy's good looks, which were the good looks of a grinning, well-conditioned chocolate cherub. Sonny Boy, twenty and a welterweight, had done all right in his first seventeen pro fights: he had won fifteen of them, not with his fists, because he didn't pack a punch, but with his legs. He could caper around a ring as fast and slippery as a

ground squirrel. Like Baby he didn't show a mark, but twice as a pro he'd been caught up with by stronger fighters and cooled. He only grinned at that. He didn't know enough about his future to worry what would happen when his legs slowed down and punches froze his grin.

Around a wide bend in the road they came on Doc Stacy's parked heap, Doc and Tree Top in the front seat. They piled in, Baby in front, the two prelim boys in back, and Doc got the old motor turning over after a couple of tries and headed back to camp.

"My nose like to froze off," Sonny Boy said, feeling at his little upended nose.

"That wouldn't be much to freeze off," Baby said.

Teddy was looking out the window at the cold.

"It got colder since yestuhday," Teddy said.

"You do much roadwork yesterday?" Baby asked him without turning around.

"Yeah, we done a couple of miles. We didn't do much else cause we got up late."

"Just got up in time to eat a couple steaks, I guess," Baby kidded.

"We had hambuggah," Doc Stacy said. "We havin steaks this afternoon. Must be somebody important in camp."

"There's a big important steak-eatin man in camp," Baby said.

Though actually food didn't interest him much at all. He liked to eat on the run—snacks, like hotdogs and cokes and candy bars. It was an old habit he'd learned as a kid when he'd missed a lot of meals at home by keeping busy taking his shine box down to Times Square on the

subway and turning up some dimes and quarters giving shines; or doing his tap-dance routine with a recorder-and-washboard band an older kid called Seldom Seen had organized—the same Seldom Seen that Baby had had his first real serious fight with.

Even now, fifteen years later, he could still remember that fight and the big crowd of toughs and hoods forming a kind of ring around him and Seldom Seen but not making any noise for fear somebody'd come along and break it up. It was one of his really good fights. Seldom Seen had been two or three years older, but Baby had lashed into him with his abnormally long arms, rushed him against the brick wall of a tenement, and beaten him down to the sidewalk. Baby had won that fight neat but he'd never gotten the pay-off—the thirty-five cents that Seldom Seen was holding out on him from the money people dropped in the hat. After that, Seldom Seen was really seldom seen when Baby was around.

Tree Top gave him a rubdown in the gym when they got back. Then they all had breakfast—ham and scrambled eggs and some of those half-baked biscuits you could buy in a store and finish the baking yourself. Spunky Rowles was a pretty good cook, and roadwork always turned out some pretty good eaters for him. Even Baby ate good this morning. And afterward went into his room and took a nap.

He slept a long time. When he woke up he couldn't hear a sound in the cabin.

It was almost twelve o'clock.

He went into the bathroom and threw a lot of water in his face, wondering why he'd slept so long, confused

that his eyes felt swollen. He felt tired, after sleeping, and he didn't like that feeling.

He wasn't hungry. He wanted some brisk exercise now to get his blood running good. But he knew what Louie was going to say about that. Louie thought he ought to eat good and lay around a lot during the first part of any training period; because Baby's problem wasn't making weight. He was what the sports writers liked to call a "natural middleweight." His training was all directed toward speed and punch and timing, not toward taking off pounds. Which gave him a head start on a fighter who really belonged in a larger weight group and had to starve and sweat himself to make the 160 pound limit. Baby could concentrate on style and train to overcome a particular opponent's strong points. With Louie Jackson's help he fought his fights in his head before he fought them in the ring. This procedure often gave his performances a cool, mechanical look to crowds who preferred reckless fighters, but this procedure, combined with such assets as a dazzling free-lance style, natural speed, and a fierce left hook used in quick combinations, made him the one great contemporary fighter.

He didn't see anybody else around in the cabin. He put on a canvas windbreaker and one of the caps, a yachting cap, he liked to wear at camp, and crossed to the gym.

•Louie said, "Somebody woke up."

Louie was leaning on the ring post watching Sonny Boy moving around the heavy bag grunting hard, pumping in short, hard punches, trying to develop that punch he didn't have. Teddy Alonzo was tap-tap-tapping the light bag. Tree Top was standing by the bell, jerking the

cord at three-minute, one-minute ringtime intervals, the way Louie liked to train his fighters. He had them on ringtime, not just when they were sparring, but for everything—rope-skipping, punching the bag, throwing the medicine ball, shadowboxing, all of it. Three minutes of activity, one minute of rest, three minutes, one minute, three and then one, till you lived in a world that was a three-and-then-one rhythm like a twenty-four-hour a day dance, and when you finally climbed up into the ring and the bell rang and you went out there, you were paced precisely for the fight's intervals, your body knew almost to a second when a round was going to end, your reflexes were already working when the bell for the next round rang.

"Think I'll change and work out," Baby said. "A little bag business and some sparring."

Louie stared hard at Sonny Boy as if he hadn't heard. Finally he said, "You're the fighter."

"I feel kinda tired," Baby told him. "I need something to get me going."

"Why don't you get going on some exercises?"

"Maybe a little punching," Baby said.

He changed over by the lockers, sitting on the rubdown table and putting on his socks and boxing shoes while Spunky Rowles and Tree Top stood by with tape and bandage for his hands. When he had his clothes on, you couldn't be sure what he was, but now, when he was sitting naked with nothing on but two socks and a shoe, you could see the brown slender body of the great fighter—neither a wormlike mass of obvious muscle like Sonny Boy's, nor a thick flesh-covered hulk like Teddy's, but long-necked, slope-shouldered, the arms and torso

covered with enough flesh to soften the look of the chest and shoulder and forearm muscles, the long dark tapering legs flashing with steel bands when he moved them.

Taping the hands can take two minutes or ten minutes, depending on how much a fighter cares about how evenly the tape goes on. Baby cared. Three or four years ago, before he made enough money and became important enough to Louie to have two trainers standing around to help him, Baby had made the hand-taping a ritual, putting on the bandage with great care, watching to get it exactly even as he wrapped it around the thumb and across the palm and through the fingers, then putting the rectangle of cotton over the knuckle and bandaging that in, then taking the strips of adhesive, already cut and hanging in a row where he'd stuck them along a chair top or a window ledge, and fastening the bandage in place. But now he had Tree Top and Spunky to do this. They worked, one on each hand, and finished the job in three or four minutes—a good job, Baby saw by beating his fist into his palm. Spunky brought out the jar of sweating cream and rubbed some on Baby's belly; Baby put on his cup and his trunks; Tree Top held the heavy gloves while Baby shoved his hands into them.

Now Teddy and Sonny Boy left the bags and began doing setting-up exercises on the mat, while Baby, at the bell, came in against the heavy bag as if it were a live opponent and he were prepared to whip it, cut it, hook it to death.

The bell, and he rested. The bell, and he went in against the heavy bag. The bell, and he rested. The bell, and he hit the heavy bag. The bell, and he rested. The bell, and he pounded the heavy bag. The bell, and he rested.

The bell, and he changed gloves and moved over to the light bag, the punch-timing bag. Left hand, right hand, left hand, right hand, bell, rest, bell, left hand, right hand, bell, rest, bell, cappa-cappa-cappa-cappa, bell, rest, bobbing and weaving and ducking and hitting and bell, rest, and half an hour had gone by and his shoulders were bright with sweat and his body was warm and he was no longer tired.

"You could fight tomorrow," Doc Stacy said. "You're really running by the clock."

"Man, I'm gonna have to run to keep out of the way of that Jorgensen." Baby tossed the gloves on a chair.

"How's the sweatin'?" Louie asked.

"I'm sweatin'," Baby said. "Think I'll put on that T shirt."

Tree Top brought him the T shirt and he put it on, shoving it down into his trunks with his thumbs. And slipped under the ropes into the ring where Teddy and Sonny Boy already were.

Bell.

They began to shadowbox, their bound hands flashed out, sweat shining on their three faces as they flayed the air. "Hunh! Hunh! Hunh!" the three fighters grunted. "Hunh! Hunh! Hunh!" Spaced across the ring, they moved forward abreast on parallel lines, reaching the other side and turning and moving back again, across again, back again, men fighting an elusive fear they could see but never touch. Teddy Alonzo fought from a crouch, his left up-pointed at a 45° angle, his right bruising the air. Sonny Boy was a picture puncher with the classic stance of a fighter who has listened to his trainers and done everything they told him to do—able to

control everything but his bright eyes that liked to roll out and away from his invisible opponent to notice whatever audience he had. Baby was a straight-up-and-down fighter, his long legs as agile as a dancer's, his outstretched left held unusually high, his right elbow snugged in to guard his body. He felt savage and separate and alone, and his strength was bright and beating within him again.

They stopped where the bell caught them, moving restlessly in place to keep their sweat up, still rolling their shoulders and turning from side to side at the waist, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth the way fighters learn to breathe.

Bell.

And they went forward again against all the opponents who would ever rise from an opposite corner and come out to meet them—across the ring and back and across again.

Bell.

Baby hesitated and then went on, because it wasn't the ring bell but the bell from the phone booth over in the corner.

It rang again.

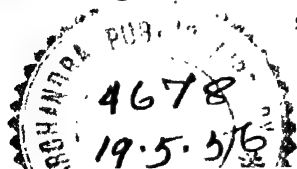
"Let it ring," Louie said. "They know this is training time."

They let it ring, and then it was dead, and Baby climbed out through the ropes and held out his hands for the sparring gloves.

"You sure you wanta spar today too?" Louie asked.

"Maybe Sonny Boy'd like to go a couple rounds," Baby said.

Louie laughed. "Here the other day you was callin' this place the Jail. You're really takin' to this jail, ain't



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you, 'Baby?' I never saw you so enthusiastic about training before."

"It's that food Spunky stoked me with this morning," Baby said, watching the way Tree Top tied his right glove. "It got me all fired up."

Spunky knocked some imaginary dust off the windowsill. "I put a big sprinkle of Spanish fly in them eggs," he said. "That always make a good man better."

From all their mouths came the little yelp of laughter that was their release from the tension of what they were doing. But the door opened in the middle of the joke and Ronnie came in out of the cold, his shoulders speckled with snowflakes.

"Where the world you been?" Baby called across to him. "That Spanish fly send you all the way down to Paterson?"

The others all backed him up with another laugh while Ronnie stood there looking blank.

"I just answered the extension," he said. "You interested in talking to some woman who calls herself Brennan or Brendan or something?"

His trainers were so close to him, living his reflexes and his emotions with him, that as Baby froze, their laughter died. He shoved his hand into the other glove, looking down at it while he said, "Tell her I'm training. I'll call her back."

Yet it wasn't what he wanted to say. What he wanted to say was: "Tell her we're through and leave me alone."

Doc Stacy fitted on his headgear, Louie slipped in his mouthpiece, and he climbed back through the ropes and stood with one glove on the top rope waiting for Sonny Boy to come in. When Sonny Boy came in and

Tree Top rang the bell, Baby touched gloves with him and went after him so hard Louie and Doc and Tree Top and Spunky looked on, puzzled, not with technical interest now, but with the uneasy feeling that there was more than mere training going on here. Sonny Boy was fast, but he wasn't fast enough for Baby. Through most of two rounds he raced backward, round and round the ring, his left jabbing defensively, his right tucked up alongside his chin; until Baby caught him in a corner and pounded two rights and a left into the body and raised an uppercut that shot Sonny Boy's mouthpiece halfway across the ring. The wild glazed look of pain and fright in Sonny Boy's eyes made Baby catch himself and back away. Sonny Boy didn't come after him. He slid along the ropes, his guard down, his feet slowed up—in no mood for any more sparring. Baby came in and tapped him lightly on the cheekbone with a left and backed away invitingly and came in again with a light cross to the body; taking up the time till the bell.

"That did it," Baby said, climbing out of the ring. "I feel just right now."

"I don't feel so good," Sonny Boy said. "I thought my head was flying off when you hit me that uppercut."

"Whatsa matter, Baby—you have him mixed up with Jorgensen?" Louie asked.

"I guess I feel a little mean today," Baby said, bracing himself while Tree Top pulled off his gloves. "Must be what Spunky put in the food."

"I'm gonna pay him to leave it *out* of the food next time," Sonny Boy said, and everything was all right again, they were all in on a joke again.

It wasn't until Baby was dressed, ready to go next door

and take his shower, that he remembered the phone call.

“I’ll see you boys in the cabin,” he said, and went out, crossed the yard, and entered the cabin and picked up the phone.

2

WHEN THE PHONE RANG she was fixing herself a rye and soda in the kitchen of the three-room, three-flights-up Morton Street apartment where she lived alone. She was looking like a Village girl today, wearing sandals and jeans and a black-and-white checked wool shirt, and she was wondering why she had called when she knew so well how much it would irritate him to have her call.

She put down the glass and went into the studio, wondering whether it would be ~~be~~, sure when she picked up the phone that it wouldn't be, and surprised to hear his voice—so far away out there in New Jersey.

"Oh, Paris," she said. "I know I shouldn't be bothering you at camp, but you promised to call and when you didn't I began to wonder whether something was wrong. I called the Tavern and they told me where you were."

There was a pause. He said, "Nothing's wrong. I was busy with a lot of things. I meant to call you."

"I've been trying to find something in the papers about the Aldi fight, but I haven't been able to. Did——"

"They gave me the run-around again," Baby said. "Aldi's slipping out to Europe; he claims his hand is hurt or something. Anyhow, I signed to fight Jorgensen the day before yesterday. That's who they want me to

fight and that's who I got to fight before they make up their mind I can fight Aldi."

"Who's Jorgensen?" Laine asked. She wished she had a cigarette. She noticed her hand trembling and ran it through her hair.

"He's a busy fighter," Baby said. "I won't take him sittin in the corner. But I already beat him once."

She knew she shouldn't ask it but she asked it anyhow. "When will I see you again? Will you come into town over the weekend?"

"I don't know," Baby said. "Haven't got any plans except to train."

"I'll miss you," she said.

"I might come in over the weekend," Baby said. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something, but she didn't know what to say. Finally he added: "All right, I'll come in Saturday. I'll call you when I get in town Saturday."

"I'll be awfully glad to see you."

"I'll call you," he said, and he was gone, and she went to the kitchen to get her drink.

She brought it back to the studio with her and dropped onto the couch, feeling exhausted, staring at the painting above the fireplace and deciding five years too late that she'd used too much red in the sky; had over-dramatized the three children grouped so listlessly in the city square with the purple buildings and the sunset sky behind them.

It was a stark thing, rough with paint applied with a palette knife, feminine only in its subject, that hung there unframed on the gray wall—a memento out of a past that she saw now had been passionate and valuable, but that she felt was gone forever. For she almost never painted

now. She felt no kinship with paint anymore, and little with life. She could no longer be that single-minded girl who'd quit Bennington at the end of her sophomore year and come to New York and the Art Students League sure with the knowledge of what she was going to do with her life. As a painter she had really had quite a lot of luck—as serious painters' luck goes. Half a dozen one-man shows over those six or seven years; not quite enough sales to live on but enough to give her some sort of status as a professional; her work admired by painters whom she admired. But during the war, after Lloyd had gone away to do his all-important duty overseas as a Special Services (*i.e.*, U.S.O.-show) lieutenant, she had found herself painting less and drinking more. She had changed to a thinner version of that eager honey-haired girl who had come here, God knew how many centuries ago, determined to take the Village by storm, determined to be so completely, so absolutely "herself" in a world of commerce where nothing seemed allowed to retain its true identity. And the change, the thinness, had transferred her from a girl just barely attractive to an almost glamorous girl with a piquant air of disenchantment about her. Her wide-spaced blue eyes had seemed to grow bigger and brighter, as though turned out to the world for the first time in search of a vision they never saw. Her rather straight, wide mouth, with its generous underlip, had turned down slightly at the corners. The salting of freckles across her small delicate nose had grown fainter, and she had suddenly, one day in 1944, cut her hair very short, as if to change herself physically would halt the process of death which she felt growing inside her. It had seemed that she who all her life had

paid so little attention to newspaper headlines was being engulfed by them; that the only nourishment she took came from them, and that she was slowly starving to death, spiritually and emotionally, because newspaper headlines contain, at best, only synthetic nourishment.

She had given blood a couple of times, had helped decorate a GI canteen in the Village, had even done her bit there as waitress and hostess every Saturday night for most of a year. But these meagre things were not enough to interest her. One day she had looked around her and discovered that almost all the friends she and Lloyd had had before the war were gone—the men into service or into war jobs in other cities, the women on long pilgrimages around the country to stay close to their soldier husbands as long as they could. She had felt cut off and alone, with only a letter now and then from Lloyd in Italy to connect her in any way with life and with the past. Not people or entertainment, or even her own work, interested her now. A job was not the answer either. She took the only kind of thing she was qualified for—a filing clerk's job in the Manhattan office of a machine-tool company—and quit it in desperation after six months. Her long walks around the city, along the waterfront, in Brooklyn and Harlem, were not a sightseer's tours but a futile attempt to walk away from herself and her present. What was wrong with her? The blood that was spilling itself in every other part of the world seemed to be draining from her own body. She felt lost, decisionless, unloved and unloving. For if her old self was dead, so was her talent; so was her love for Lloyd.

And then one brisk autumn afternoon in that terrible and endless year, 1944, she had allowed herself, with

detached and cynical amusement, to be picked up in Washington Square by a tall blond GI with sergeant's stripes on his arm. It had turned out to be a two months' affair of passion, but not an affair of the heart, and most certainly not an affair of the head. She who had always been immensely curious about the past and the feelings of everyone she knew had not tried to find out anything about Staff Sergeant Jerry Clawson of Minneapolis, Minnesota. She had wanted, rather, not to know anything about him; not to let him loom as an individual in her life; but simply to lose herself in him and his uniformed anonymity. She had never slept with him in the apartment—at least she hadn't done that to Lloyd—but in hotels. And for two months, in an affair paced by the weekends he could get from Camp Kilmer she had succeeded in killing her desperate feeling of isolation—perhaps killing in the process all that remained of her old self.

When he'd slipped out to England, she had known that, however anonymous she had insisted on keeping him, however much on the plane of pure lust she had kept their affair, he was still the most important thing that had happened to her during the war. At twenty-six, through a likeable, empty-headed boy of twenty-two, she had managed to lose her husband, once and for all. For witty, soft-spoken, rather effeminate Lloyd was no one she wanted to live with anymore. She no longer wanted to travel with people out of Lloyd's successful little professional world of advertising copywriters (like him) and junior editors and sold-out commercial artists who'd actually never had anything to sell out. Lacking vitality herself now, not quite sure any more that she'd ever had

a vital talent around which to centre her life, she wanted to ally herself with whatever seemed vital, and raw and inspired to her.

For a year or so after the war and after the divorce, she thought she'd found it in a wild-eyed, red-bearded sculptor of thirty-five with the strange and exotic name of George Jones, a man so involved in the psychic fury of hacking out his nameless bits of stone and marble that he often forgot such common-places as the day of the month and dinnertime and the obligation to wear shoes. They had gone to Rome together to live on her small income and his GI Bill of Rights money, and she had stayed with him. Even when he forgot that he belonged to her and had gone off for days and weeks at a time with one or another of his Italian girls, or with some member of the free-loving little group of American female bohemians who passed through the Albergho d'Inghilterra and the Via Margutta.

It couldn't last, of course; she had known that. And there wasn't any question of its lasting when he'd finally gone off for good to live with someone else. She had come home then. She had felt very tired, but mature with the knowledge that nothing worth having ever lasted. That what she wanted in love or in life or in men was good for a month or a year, but hardly more than that. At thirty, it was a fairly dangerous discovery. It had left her vulnerable that night in Madison Square Garden five weeks ago when she'd first laid eyes on a negro prizefighter named Paris "Baby" James.

Until that night she had been to the fights only once in her life. That was before the war, and she had hated all of it—the callow crowd, the lust for the sight of other men's

blood, the broken-nosed, punch-aged fighters, themselves who were called twenty-three or twenty-five on the programme but who looked to her like men already old, willing to suffer the humiliation of dying gradually, blow by blow, in public for money. But Dick had brushed all her objections aside. "You just never saw a *great* fighter," he'd told her. "I'm going to take you to see one tonight. I'm even going to pay real money for the tickets for a change."

She saw Dick Willis as the most uncomplicated male she'd ever met, and for that reason alone had rather liked the persistence he showed in calling her up. His profession, which consisted of going around watching the games that grown men played for money and writing about them in the bristling strings of private clichés that were the accepted language of the sports pages, seemed one of the cleaner professions she could think of. He was touching forty, a stocky, bass-voiced man with the ghost of a bald spot haunting the top of his dark head, and he had only three interests in life: sex, food, and sports—any kind of sports. She'd known without asking the reason he'd been calling her up two or three times a week for the past couple of months—he saw the possibilities of much fun and many games with an "interesting" girl in Greenwich Village who had her own apartment, her own livelihood, and all the time in the world to be on call when he wanted her—but she'd already straightened him out, as frankly as she could without hurting his feelings, on how she felt about him. "You found me in the midst of my saintly year, Dick," she'd told him one night when he came up for dinner. "The next time I have an affair I want to fall in love—even if it's only for a day." "And

here I always thought I was lovable," he'd answered easily; for his dark good looks had got him by such reservations too many times before for him to take her seriously.

And so the fights, that Friday night five weeks ago, had been merely a part of his goodnatured campaign to lure her into an affair. But from the moment she entered that mammoth igloo of emptiness called the Garden with the crowd roaring in her ears and two entangled, half-naked white men, looking very pink under the powerful ring lights, punching at each other down there (for the preliminary fights had already started), she'd found herself reacting differently from the first time she was here. She rather liked the crudeness and savagery of this atmosphere tonight. Perhaps, she thought as they took their seats, it's because I'm more willing now to let myself be carried off and drowned in other people's emotions—emotions I once thought made me commonplace and mean. Perhaps it's because I'm only a spiritual sponge now, hardly a person at all.

"There he is," Dick said. "Now don't tell me you don't think this guy looks like class."

She had turned to see him coming up the aisle in the train of his white-sweatered handlers—taller than any of them, his head hooded in a towel, his red silk robe saying, when he'd passed her and climbed up into the ring, BABY in white letters on the back. Rid of the robe, he became an animated bronze statue out of some sculptor's dream—doing a strange little dance in place as he faced his handlers, talking to them, his face touched faintly by a smile that seemed ironic to her, as if he himself saw something amusing in his being here tonight on display

before this stadium packed with fully-clothed, overweight, cigar-smoking men and their sprinkling of women.

But his dead-dark eyes belied the smile.

Through the first round she had watched him trace his opponent, a shorter, more muscular man, a Cuban named Chico Chavez, with a concentration that was almost hypnotic. And as the fight progressed she'd forgotten that what she was really seeing was a human being staggering and bleeding under the punishment of those long arms that flashed in and out of Chavez' defence with the easy complexity of a concert pianist's fingers on a keyboard. She'd found her throat open with the crowd's throat, her body leaning out of her seat with the crowd's body, begging for his punishment as if he were the black angel of death himself; as if all punishment, all blood, all pain, all death were right and beautiful and desirable if only he, moving so casually-swiftly on those dark dancer's legs, fighting his fight with a savage grace that seemed cool and intellectual beside his opponent's frenzied feints and attacks and retreats—if only he would deal it out. Even as Chavez, bent into position with a series of hooks to the body and knocked out sharply with a left to the jaw, was beginning to fall and she recognized the fight for what it was by the roll of revulsion in her stomach, she was still on her feet yelling for a finish, for a death that had somehow become her own and was acceptable so long as he who brought it could look so cool and so right and so beautiful bringing it.

"Could we go?" she'd asked, as Chavez, a counted-out, blood-smeared Lazarus, pulled himself back up to the height of a man with the help of his handlers and the

ropes, and Baby, his gloves removed, let his taped right hand be raised for the crowd.

"There's a pretty good——"

"Please, let's go. I couldn't see another fight."

"You warmed up to it very nicely," Dick said as they reached the street and the cold night air swept some of her emotion away.

"To tell you the truth, I feel a little ashamed."

"*Ashamed?*"

"Ashamed of becoming so involved in something so brutal. I wanted him to kill him! Did you know that?"

"Yeah, I guess everybody feels a little like that. Actually it wasn't one of Baby's greatest fights. Everybody thought Chavez would be harder to hit. And did you notice one thing—Baby kept leading with a right in the second round. I never saw him do that so much before."

She'd begun to laugh then, uncontrollably, hysterically—right there in the street as they waited for a cab.

"Have I been humorous?" Dick asked. "You should hear me when I say something funny."

But it had passed—a kind of final release of all she'd felt tonight—and she dried her eyes and preceded him solemnly into the cab. Over the hot rum punches they ordered in a bar on West Fourth Street twenty minutes later, she told him: "I feel as though something important had really happened to me tonight—the first time I've felt that way about anything in—God, I guess it's been years."

"You saw a great fighter, that's all," Dick said. "I told you it was a different experience than seeing a couple of pugs maul each other. Like those prelim boys who came on just before him."

"Have you ever met him?"

"Sure—I've interviewed him a couple of times. Been down to his training camp at Greenwood Lake."

"May I go along next time you go?"

"You mean as a lady of the press? I don't think that would work out. But if it's a public exhibition day, why, anybody can go. Sure, I'll take you down there sometime."

"When?"

Dick had laughed. "I guess it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind," he said, "but you'll have to admit it's pretty peculiar. Here I had to *beg* you to go to the fights tonight and now here you are *logging me* to take you to a training camp."

"But it isn't that I want to visit a training camp just to see a training camp," Laine told him, somehow unable to meet his eyes. "I guess what I really want is to see what Baby James is like when he isn't making an official appearance in Madison Square Garden. Whether everything I felt tonight" (it was silly saying all this to Dick; she didn't expect him to understand; she hardly understood herself), "whether everything I felt was just something I dreamed up, or whether he really is a kind of extraordinary human being I've never met before."

"I can tell you anything you want to know about him. For one thing he's a very sharp guy. He's never had any education—he's lucky if he finished a year or two of high school—but he's sharp. He can give you some very sharp answers. I remember one time——"

"Then when will you take me?" For she didn't want to see him through Dick's news-angle eye.

"I'd take you tomorrow, but it'll probably be a lot of

weeks before he's training again. He's in a class now where he doesn't have to fight every month—he can pick the fights that'll bring the gates."

"Is he the champion?"

Her ignorance made him laugh. "No, he's not champion. He ought to be but he's not."

"Why isn't he?"

"Well, I guess the simplest way to put it would be that he hasn't gotten a match with the champion yet—a gentleman named Tony Aldi who's been avoiding him for two years. But it goes back farther than that; if you're interested."

"I *am* interested."

"All right, it goes like this. Actually Baby was the number-one contender over two years ago—meaning he should have had first crack at the championship, which a fighter named Ike Frazier held at the time. Everybody agreed to that except the International Boxing Club—and the I.B.C., in case you didn't know it, is a private corporation that sponsors and controls big-time boxing in America. The I.B.C. signed Tony Aldi instead of Baby to fight Frazier—Aldi was then only the *third*-ranking contender—Aldi won, and he's been avoiding Baby ever since—with the help, of course, of the I.B.C. and the general lethargy of the boxing commissions."

"But why did they do that? I mean, why did the I.B.C. give Aldi the chance to win the championship when Baby should have had it?"

"There are a couple of explanations. One of them is that somebody in the I.B.C. had a financial interest in Aldi, but that's never been proved. The most likely one is that the I.B.C., which is out to make money, naturally

wants the champion who'll be the biggest drawing card. The public likes to see a white man win, and a white champion like Aldi can be a bigger drawing card than Baby in a sport where negroes hold almost all the championships anyhow. So there you have it. Aldi's a good tough fighter, and he's champion. And Baby's a *great* fighter, and he's out in the cold."

"When he fights again," Laine said, "I want to go."

"Okay. It's a date." But he'd continued to smile at her, amused at the look of complete seriousness on that small, intense face. "If I get up around the Fancy Fish Tavern sometime in the near future, I'll drop in and tell him he has a new admirer. That's a bar up in Harlem where he hangs out."

"Then let's add that to our agenda too," Laine said. "Let's go up there for a drink some night."

He hadn't looked too pleased with the idea. "I think it might be pretty uncomfortable for both of us. It's not the kind of Harlem bar where you see white couples having drinks."

"That's just the kind of Harlem bar I'd like to go to."

"Look, Mademoiselle Brendan," he'd answered reasonably, "it's one thing for a white guy who's minding his own business to wander around Harlem *alone*—but I don't much care for the idea of mixing a white woman into it and taking her in a place like the Fancy Fish. It's a whore bar. Numbers runners and dope peddlers and the kind of rough coloured sporting crowd you'd expect to find in a place where a boxer like Baby hangs out. We'd be very uncomfortable, and it wouldn't be my idea of fun. I'll take you up to Harlem—I'll take you to the Shalimar."

"You make it sound so romantic that now you've got to take me to the Fancy Fish."

"I do?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, if I *have* to, I guess I will."

And two afternoons later he'd called for her to take her. "But I'm not guaranteeing that Baby will be there," he said as they stopped a cab on Sheridan Square and settled back, not touching, in the cool impersonal leather.

"We'll wait him out," Laine answered — sensing something like real happiness for the first time in a long time; sensing that happiness was only the anticipation of adventure. For tonight she wasn't going to a Village place or a midtown place. She was going to a rough bar in Harlem where a kind of man she'd never met before might be. Perhaps it was Dick's reluctance that had made all this seem as exotic and dangerous as a journey to a foreign land.

Their cab took the West Side Drive—past a continuous parade of oncoming cars, past the gray, empty Hudson. At Forty-eighth Street the Queen Mary, as huge as adventure and ready to sail, loomed up with lighted funnels from which spirals of steam rose dreamily. It belonged to her, as a boat you've spent five days at sea on always belongs to you. It belonged to George Jones too, and the thought of a year that was really lost, that had really gone nowhere, came rolling in like a tidal wave of defeat across all her warm expectancy. To escape it she'd turned suddenly to Dick, her face vulnerable with a look that was almost pleading.

"Whenever I go to Harlem," she said, "I always feel

I'm going somewhere a lot more foreign than anywhere the Queen Mary could take me."

"You mean you've actually been around 'Harlem before? You never told me that."

"It was during the war. I've only been there once since. But during the war I was running around so frantically looking at everything. I seemed to be possessed by the idea it was all going to disappear some night while I was asleep."

As the cab turned off at 125th Street and crawled eastward through heavy mid-evening traffic and garish shrubberies of neon and clusters of idlers who night and day never seem to be absent from Harlem streets—she remembered it all again; remembering it the way a traveller remembers a city he has stopped in occasionally through the years. Chicken shacks and pool halls and that door over there that said simply LOST SOULS STATION with no other explanation, and the big supermarkets run by white people, the hock shops, the endless successions of bars, the gypsy fortune-telling places, the Spanish movie houses, the Lucky Pants Store, the First Church of Christ Holiness, Incorporated. And everywhere, wherever you looked at whatever time of the day or night, the swarms of people lingering in the streets, saying a thousand hellos and a thousand goodbyes, leaving one another at street corners only to hurry back together again for one last word about something tremendously important—a last word that would take the space of an hour to get said.

What did they all do for a living, she wondered, and when did they do it? Was there, actually room in these buildings to house them all?

It's like a vast black bohemia, she thought finally. A

kind of coloured Left Bank where everyone keeps a roving eye out to observe everyone else and dreams his days away in endless street corner conversations. . . .

"Right here, driver."

"It looks just like a bar," Laine said after they got out and Dick paid the fare.

She would never have noticed it among all the other bars like it along Seventh Avenue. Built in depth, deep and narrow like a streetcar, with lots of green and red neon in its sign outside and lots of chrome in its jukebox and behind its bar inside. There were two sharply dressed middle-aged negro men talking outside on the sidewalk—as two or more people always seemed to be standing, talking, outside every bar in Harlem—but inside it wasn't crowded. Two dark pretty girls sat with neatly crossed legs at the front end. Three or four men, two of them wearing hats, stood at the rear. Beyond the bar Laine could see a few tables, but nobody was sitting at them. The jukebox, a Cadillac among jukeboxes that measured five feet across and played a hundred selections, was bulging out the walls with a hot bop recording of "Body and Soul." But there was nothing sinister about the atmosphere here as Dick had implied. It was a rather slick, clean bar, as a matter of fact. Its only claim to being sinister was that it was a little darker than she liked a bar to be—dark enough for the bartender's face down there to be almost lost, so that his starched white coat seemed to be moving around with an invisible man inside it.

That coat came floating toward them as they settled themselves on two tall stools, and a heavy placid face, with cheeks as full as a squirrel's, emerged above it. They ordered martinis, and sat for fifteen minutes as people

came and went behind them and the jukebox played on and on with only a short slug of silence between numbers to reveal there were conversations going on here.

After a second round Dick said, "Looks like a dry run. Are you getting hungry?"

"A little—though I wouldn't call this exactly a *dry* run." She turned the stem of her glass between her fingers. "I wouldn't know him if I saw him, probably. He isn't one of the men down there at the end, is he?"

"No. And I think you'll know him when you see him, all right. He dresses so you'll know him."

He was dressed so you would know him when he came in a few minutes later—in a belted camel's-hair three-quarter coat and pigskin gloves and a brown flat-crowned felt hat that rode the back of his head. By all this, plus a tieless violet sport shirt, you would know him as someone who had money to spend and was spending a lot of it on clothes, but you would not know him as a fighter. Even in that flashy draped coat he was a nonchalant sapling of a man with a bright, inquisitive, unmarked face, who stopped at the door to say something to somebody, then came on in, looking toward the back of the bar and intending to go there when Dick, turning on his stool, asked, "How are you, Baby?"

He stopped and studied Dick's face for a moment, in no hurry, taking the time to figure out who had spoken to him before he answered.

"Oh, yeah," he said, a smile crossing his mouth but not his eyes, "you're a sports writer, ain't you? You were up at camp."

"Dick Willis," Dick said, shaking hands with him. "I came up *here* to talk with you once, too—you remember?"

"My memory's taken a vacation," Baby James said. "Lately even yesterday seems like a long time ago." He'd glanced at her then, trying within the space of a second to decide whether he might have met her somewhere, too.

"Here's an admirer of yours, Baby. Laine Brendan, Paris James."

The word "admirer" had made her feel like a foolish and inconsequential bobbysoxer being introduced at last to Sinatra. Her face went suddenly warm and she crossed her legs nervously, saying, "How do you do."

Afterward she couldn't remember whether it was she who'd offered her hand first or not. What she could remember was the sure, easy grip his hand had in the soft pigskin glove and the way he'd looked into her face—uncertainly but still with the little ironic smile—as though he himself were surprised at the handshake. She had picked up her drink then as an excuse to avert her eyes; spilling some but not bothering to dry her hand—thinking quickly that if she dried her hand now he might think she did it because . . . But why was she allowing herself to make all this so important? She turned her large eyes defiantly back to him, facing him squarely. He seemed somehow to be laughing at her discomfort. He seemed to know all about her, and to think her presence in the Fancy Fish Tavern very, very amusing.

"You looked mighty sharp Friday night," Dick told him. "Shouldn't be any trouble getting you a match with Aldi now."

"Yeah," Baby said. "I've heard a lot of promises."

"Well, you can't say we haven't been beating a big drum for you down at the paper."

"You boys have all been givin me a lot of good treatment," Baby answered. "All I got to do is live long enough and I'll get my chance."

"Here"—Dick moved over one stool to let Baby sit between them—"why don't you have something with us?"

Baby had glanced toward the end of the bar then, checking to make sure whoever he was meeting was busy talking to somebody else. "All right—but don't move over, I'll just stand." He said to the bartender: "Gimme my pink milk special, Georgie."

It arrived in a tall narrow glass, bedroom pink with white foam on top.

"No alcohol," Laine said. She could hear the martinis in her voice.

"No fun in my business," Baby told her. "Unless you think somethin like going to bed at ten o'clock or gettin hit in the mouth is fun."

"You don't get hit much," Dick said.

"I get hit," Baby answered. "*Everybody* gets hit. Somebody swings his arms at you *wilfully* for half an hour, you're bound to get hit sooner or later."

The bartender, who had been standing a few feet away pretending not to be listening but actually listening very closely, abruptly ducked his face, tightened with laughter at this last thing Baby said, down toward some soiled glasses under the bar, which he began to rinse one by one under the tap and drop into a sinkful of soapy water—keeping his eyes away from Baby and Dick and her. Seeing him out of the corner of her eye, Laine couldn't help smiling too, though she wasn't conscious what Baby had said was that funny.

"I've been introduced by my friend as an admirer of

yours"—she turned to him with a little echo of the bartender's good humour still on her lips—"but the truth is I'd never seen you fight until the day before yesterday. I——"

"Don't ever do it again," Paris James said. "Save your money. You'll only be making me rich."

And the bartender laughed again, still not looking at them, still washing his glasses, and she saw now that it wasn't really laughter at Baby's answers in themselves, it was the fact that Baby was slapping the answers at people like Dick and her, two white slummers up from downtown.

For the benefit of both members of this team playing her off as their straight man, she said: "Nevertheless I intend to see you every time you fight—whether I'll make you rich or not." And added as a challenge of her own: "But what I'd really like to do is see you go through your training sometime."

"That's easy." Baby finished off his special and hit her with an amused eye. "All you got to do is come over to the gym or the camp or wherever I'm training on a public exhibition day. Anybody can come." He looked at Dick. "Why don't you bring her over?"

Dick, so obviously uncomfortable at the way she was speaking up with the help of her three martinis, nodded. "Sure, I'll do that."

"But maybe I don't want to come on a public exhibition day," Laine said. "Maybe I'd like to see the real thing, not just the public show."

Baby had looked long at her then, spelling each of her words out in his head before deciding what she could have in mind. In the end he'd rolled with her challenge

out of an old racial habit and said, "Sure thing. Just give me a ring sometime and I'll fix it up for you." He was laughing at her, but she didn't really care.

"And where would one give you a ring?"

His thumb indicated the phone booth in the corner. "Over there. That's where I get most of my messages." Glancing toward the end of the bar. "I've got a friend looking impatient down there—I better go and cool him off." He touched both of them with his eyes. "See you sometime again, Mr. Willis—Miss Brendan."

It was when she and Dick looked back to their martinis that they noticed it there on the bar: a half dollar, bright and arrogant, beside his tall empty glass. But before either of them could say anything about it, the bartender had picked it up and dropped it cheerfully into his cash register.

Three or four times during her life Laine Brendan had been filled with a need for violent change and had done some rather desperate things. Quitting college at the end of her sophomore year and coming to New York had been one of them: she had shocked her mother so profoundly that their relations had shown a certain strain ever since. Picking up a stray soldier in Washington Square during the war had been another. And one afternoon a couple of years ago, after her divorce from Lloyd but before George Jones had walked into her life, she had been riding in a cab up Fifth Avenue on her way to a cocktail party on East Fifty-third Street (most of the people she'd known in the Village before the war seemed to have moved uptown since the war—into elevator apartments and plush jobs as well), when she'd suddenly not wanted to go to a cocktail party at all, or to see any more of New York.

And she'd leaned forward and told the driver to take her to Grand Central. Not to Penn Station, where the obvious thing would have been to buy a ticket back to her hometown, Huntington, Long Island, and her mother, who lived there quite alone now in the same house where Laine had been born, but to Grand Central, which had no emotional connotation for her at all.

Even walking toward the ticket window, she had still not known where she was going. She had a lot of money with her—the whole amount from the monthly check she got from the trust fund her father had settled on her—but it was money she would have to live on for the next thirty days; nothing to squander as unthinkingly as she was prepared to squander it now. What had made her say "Chicago" to the ticket agent? And what had made her spend those three lost dreary days in a Loop hotel in a city where she knew no one? Recently she had seen more clearly what it was—not a yearning for adventure, not a need to get away from the futile gesture her life had become, but an urge toward destruction that shied from such decisive acts as jumping out of windows and slashing wrists and sought a more feminine, more labyrinthine way.

This same desperation made her do what she'd done that night after she and Dick had gone to the Fancy Fish. After dinner she told him she was tired—though it was only ten o'clock—and bolting the door as his footsteps faded down the stairs, she'd felt her heart alive with the strangeness of her plan. Even as she picked up the phone she could still barely believe she was going to do it. And the long wait between somebody's answer and his hello—a wait filled with the faraway jive of the jukebox and the

buzz and brrr of voices—had seemed at least as long as all the rest of the evening put together.

He hadn't even known who she was at first. He didn't even recognize her voice or her name. But then he knew, saying "Oh, yeah" just as he'd done when he finally recognized Dick this evening. "Wait a minute I shut the door on this booth . . . Yeah, here I am. So you want to see me do some sparring sometime. Only thing is, I guess you'll——"

"No," she said quickly, "it wasn't about that at all. I really only wanted to ask whether you'd come down for dinner tomorrow night."

His incredulity on the other end of the wire was almost a live thing she could reach out and touch at this distance. "For *dinner*?" he'd said.

"I'm really the world's greatest porterhouse-steak cook," she answered. "I thought perhaps you'd like to come down and let me give a *démonstration*."

Something like a laugh came from his end then. "You serious?"

"Of course I'm serious."

"Well, if you're serious I'll come down right now—how would that be? And I won't need any porterhouse steak; I'll settle for a piece of pie."

He was saying this, she thought, just to string her along; just to play a telephone game with her because he thought she was stringing him along. "All right, come down now, then," she told him defiantly, "if you like that better."

"Where do you live?"

"In the Village." And she gave him the address and the apartment number.

"They probably wouldn't even let me in your apartment house—did you ever think of that?"

"It's a walk-up," she answered. "There's never anybody around. And if you mean because you're coloured—why there's a coloured girl living right downstairs."

He'd laughed again. "You sure have got everything figured out."

But no, the truth was she didn't have anything figured out or she wouldn't have spent the forty-five minutes between the time he hung up and the downstairs buzzer sounded, pacing the floor, going to the window every few minutes to see if a car had pulled up, stopping in front of the mirror to study her pale face with its large, too-bright eyes that looked back at her as surprised as a stranger's. What am I doing? she'd thought. I don't even know him. Suppose he gives my address to someone else and tells them to come down here—suppose he has that kind of sense of humour? He might have. Or suppose he's really as savage as he looks—anything might happen to me.

Thinking of her danger had an almost calming effect on her. It was almost enjoyable—until the downstairs buzzer sounded and she turned around as if startled out of a dream. She stared at the answering button for several seconds before going over and pressing it.

With the door open and one foot in the hall, she had waited, watching for his face to appear around the last turn in the stairs. And then a face did appear, and more than a face, a whole figure of a man coming toward her—a white man, hatless and grayhaired, in a tan raincoat. Coming toward her and returning her unbelieving stare with a stare that was equally unbelieving. Then passing

her by as she stood breathless—going on up to the floor above. So that a moment later when Paris James came around the turn she had seen him as almost an old friend coming to call.

“I’ve been looking at all the numbers on the doors,” he said. “You live right on top the world.”

“I didn’t think it was you. Someone else came up ahead of you.”

“He knew where he was going,” Baby said. “I didn’t.”

“Won’t you come in?”

He went in and she shut the door behind him. He didn’t take off the flat-crowned hat; he just turned and looked at her, those dark eyes which he’d trained on Chavez two nights ago now trained on her. He was smiling a little.

“Hat and coat?” Laine asked. “It’s an old custom of the house.”

Her hands were trembling as she hung them in the closet.

“That’s the most forlorn-looking chair, but it’s also the most comfortable.” She pointed to the old blue overstuffed by the window.

But he didn’t take it. He was standing there on the round white string rug in front of the couch, looking at her.

“It’s a long ride down here from Harlem,” he said.

Though his words were said through that little smile of his, she felt something not quite friendly in them.

“I know it is. That’s why I’m very thrilled that you came.”

“And why’d I come?” Paris James asked. “Do you know?”

"I don't know," she said, chilled by his tone. "I hope it wasn't just for the pie, because all I've got is some coconut cake. Would you like some?"

He'd laughed then, sat down on the arm of the couch, and she noticed the suit he was wearing—a real Harlem suit, dark gray with tiny flecks of colour in it and lots of drape to it. His shoes said "Thirty dollars." "One of us two," he said, "is crazy. Maybe me."

"Because I invited you and you came?"

"Yeah," he said, "because you invited me and I came."

"But hasn't a woman ever invited you to dinner before?"

"Yeah," Baby said, "they have. But not a white woman."

"But maybe I'm not a white woman. Maybe I'm coloured and you didn't know it."

"You're white, all right," Baby said. "If you weren't I could tell"—he snapped two long brown fingers—"just like that, no matter how white you *look*."

A truck rattled over a sewer cover in the street below and she went to the window, turning away from this strange and ridiculous meeting which she herself had brought about. Although she didn't hear him come up she was aware that he was standing behind her.

"It's started to rain," she said to her frightened reflection in the pane; to his taller reflection behind her.

"It's been trying to rain all evening," Baby said.

"I'll make some coffee and get out the cake."

"Yeah. Cake sounds good."

But when she turned, he didn't move; she had to brush past him to go to the kitchen.

"Please sit down and be comfortable," she called. "It'll take a minute for the water to boil."

He appeared in the doorway. "I'm not used to sitting down. I like to keep moving."

She brought out the cake and plates, and cut the cake into two pieces and put them on the plates. She couldn't look at him. She felt the way she imagined a negro feels in the presence of a white person asserting his detachment and his arrogance. Giving the kettle a little shake to persuade it to boil, she said, "I've made a fool of myself, haven't I—calling you up and getting you down here for no real reason at all."

"I felt like taking a ride tonight."

She looked gratefully around at him. "That doesn't make me any less of a fool."

She carried everything on a tray into the studio and put it on the coffee table in front of the couch. Then she sat down—but he continued standing.

"Why don't you pull up the chair," she said. "Or sit here on the couch."

He sat on the couch.

"Cream and sugar?"

"Yeah—thanks."

But he didn't touch the cake or the cup she put in front of him. He was looking at the paintings—frowning slightly as he studied them. The big one, Aerial View of a City Nobody Knows, a painted patchwork of wild colours above the phonograph; some groupings of faces—she'd once spent more than a year merely grouping faces on canvas, possessed by the possibilities of the world of eyes and mouths, the planes of cheekbones, the texture of skin and hair—hung at various heights on the gray

wall between the phonograph and the hall door; the long narrow one, Running People, between the two windows that looked down on the street.

"You must be an art collector," he said.

"I'm a painter," she answered. And modified it: "If I'm anything I'm a painter."

"*You* painted all those?"

He sounded disbelieving. He actually got up and went over to her Aerial View and studied it up close.

"It jumps," he said. His hands were in his pants pockets; he blinked his eyes when he looked around. "I could go blind in about five minutes looking at this one." He went on to the three heads turned at different angles that were all the same person. "They all look alike," Baby James said.

"They are—he used to be my husband."

He gave her that quizzical look again, surprised that she had a past to mention and a talent, if only a lost one, to display. She felt something new now in his attitude. He took the trouble to explain after he sat down:

"I didn't figure you were an artist or anything like that."

"I don't know if I can still call myself one or not. I've hardly done anything at all in the last few years."

"Doin somethin else?"

"No, just looking backward."

"That sounds like the wrong thing to do." He pulled the cake over closer and took a bite. "I never figured a painter was like a fighter—ten good years and then you're through."

"It's a matter of belief," she said. "I seem to have lost mine."

"Belief?"

"Belief and passion," she said.

"It's a matter of seeing it then doing it," he said. "And when you come to the time when you see it and don't do it or can't do it, you're gone." He drank some coffee—half the cup at one swallow. "Maybe that holds good for a fighter or artist or business man or anybody."

"But my trouble is worse," she told him. "I could still do it; it's just that. I can't see it anymore."

He studied her face—did he only seem to be amused by her little confession, or was she reading something into his expression that wasn't there?

"We're gettin' real complicated," he said finally. "Maybe you ought to put that on and we'll get *uncomplicated*."

He meant the phonograph, and she went over to it. "There's a rumba record on it now."

"Fine, I like rumba."

"I'll put some Teddy Wilson-Billie Holidays on top of it." "Fine."

He didn't let her sit back down. They were dancing, and his body wasn't hard as she'd imagined it, but as supple as the bodies of wild animals that run all night every night of their lives must be. One by one the records dropped, spinning them on. She added more—and felt a flash of embarrassment as she turned from the machine with her arms out to accept him. Yet he seemed to accept her too in the way he held her so knowingly, subtly adjusting his rhythm to hers, giving her a feeling of wholeness she had never known in dancing before.

Her legs were numb, her breath hurt in her chest when finally they discovered that the last record had already

played through twice. She turned off the machine and, looking around, saw that he hadn't moved from where she'd left him. His face was once more the sure, dead-sure, ironic, catlike face she had seen at the Fancy Fish earlier this evening and in the ring two nights ago. She felt that fear of him, vaguely attractive, that she'd felt when he first came in.

"You're different, dancing." She folded her legs under her as she sat on the couch again and nervously lit a cigarette. "You seem like a very withdrawn person otherwise."

"Withdrawn." He repeated it as if he'd never heard the word before. She didn't know why he laughed. "With-*drawn*."

And before she understood what he was doing, he'd come over to the couch and sat down not with distance between them as before, but close to her; so close that his arm touched hers. Then that arm was around her and he was kissing her—going straight to her mouth with no preliminaries, his full mouth completely possessing her smaller one so that there seemed no choice except to respond as absolutely, as directly . . . his hand equally direct, touching her for the first time in the middle of the kiss not on her hair, her face, or even her breast but there immediately and nakedly where she felt herself rising to meet him as she saw fleetingly before she closed her eyes that the misting rain outside had changed to a whirling curtain of snow flashing from the light in this room like a cascade of falling stars against the night.

Did minutes or hours or years elapse between the time they stood tearing off their clothes in the darkness of her bedroom till the moment she opened unwilling eyes

blinking with 'gray morning light to find him gone? She only knew as she lay there afterward, floating in a shallow pool of unreality, that they had been as impersonal as two wild things out of the night, meeting by chance in an unmapped wilderness and taking each other with an unthinking urgency as pure and powerful as raw life itself—saying not a word to each other the whole night through but crying out in the unfriendly darkness together or separately like cats, like beasts, like creatures that have plunged down into the whirlpool of bitter life and touched, again and again, a burning fountainhead—with her own mind repeating a thousand times a forbidden word that became her talisman to passion, that word "nigger" burning in her mind not for him but for herself, saying I want to be your nigger, your nigger, your nigger, to be your black nigger, nigger, nigger, passion rising with the word until she knew that truly she had her wish to be his black nigger forever and now. . . .

Exhausted, aching in her breasts, her loins, her legs, even her jaws and her bitten, metallic-tasting tongue, alone in her bed she had gone to sleep again—to sleep away that whole day until dusk awoke her starving, still aching, dazed with the thought of what she had done, cleansed by this night of her anxious present as she'd been cleansed three nights ago of her apathetic past; too weary to wonder where or when he had gone or how she would find him again. But knowing in her blood and bones and brain that she would have to find him again. . . .

But of course he hadn't called, and she knew he wouldn't. She knew on what terms their night had been, better than she'd known the terms of her relationship

with any man before. A sea of nothingness lapped at the shores of the lost exotic island that night had been.

Trying to accept it for what it was, she tried, to her own surprise, to work—using new brushes she'd bought a year ago to begin a shining white painting that she thought of as a vision of snow. But in the midst of this first start in months she remembered promising last week to put in an appearance at an art class a friend of hers was teaching in a loft on West Eighth Street. Already late, she'd hurried over there—wondering as she offered her own little comments on the work of these half dozen people what right she had to criticize anybody else's painting when she herself had snarled and almost lost the taut wire of creative tension that connects art and life.

But Lillian, that faithful friend, had thought her remarks quite wonderful. "Especially your objections to the nonobjectivists," Lillian told her after the class had broken up and they were having coffee in the Griddle across the street. "I'm so tired of hearing that 'A painting exists in and for itself and is responsible only to the rules it creates for itself.' I think you really made everyone there feel like painting when you said all that about paint and canvas being only the tools of a passion or a vision and the living painter himself has to exist in his work and walk through it to the world. I agree with you entirely—art is a connecting link between people; it doesn't merely exist all by itself."

Laine had only smiled in answer. She'd made her great effort for the class, but she felt a long way from all the mechanics and philosophies of art this morning—a long way from Greenwich Village and Lillian Glidden or any of the people she knew.

And then three nights later when he still hadn't called she humbled herself and called him at the Tavern, but he wasn't there. She called him again the next afternoon.

"You do remember me?" she'd said with a certain edge to her voice.

He laughed. "Yeah, my memory's gettin better now. Why don't you get in a cab and we'll have something to eat.

"At the Fancy Fish?"

She felt his hesitation. "Wait a minute, there's a place on First Avenue round 116th Street called Patsy's. It's an Italian place and the food is real good. How bout if I met you there?"

"All right," she said. But her voice was faint from the knowledge that this step in going out publicly with him was a more decisive step in her life than any past or future intimacy could be.

When she got out of the cab on the barren tenement-lined avenue and realized that this wasn't Harlem at all but an Italian neighbourhood on the fringe of Harlem, she sensed that in meeting her here he was revealing the same misgivings she'd had; that perhaps it was as embarrassing for him to be seen by his friends escorting a white woman in Harlem as it would be for her to walk into Abruzzi's or Charles' with him—or any restaurant where she was likely to meet people she knew.

So it was that in a place patronized by Italians and Puerto Ricans and a few negroes, but by no one who knew either her or Baby, she had felt as isolated as though she were meeting him in her own apartment again. It was an isolation that neither of them ever mentioned, not that

night nor the three or four other nights they saw each other in restaurants equally foreign to both of them—returning afterward to Morton Street; to the heat of their bold affair and their shameless cries.

She was the one who'd made the first move toward bringing their attachment into the open. One afternoon she'd invited a dozen friends for cocktails and asked Baby to come down without bothering to tell him that other people were going to be here—knowing without wanting to believe it that he wouldn't come if he understood the circumstances.

He'd looked as startled as a man entering the wrong apartment when she opened the door and he saw behind her all those white faces. His sudden stiffness told her she'd done the stupidest thing possible in arranging this; especially when she'd invited the only two coloured people she knew: big genial Percy Liscott, who affected a goatee and a GI field jacket and could talk about nothing except his own poetry and the little success he'd had getting it published; and the girl downstairs who taught at a progressive school for children a few streets away. For they were both intellectual negroes, and more than that, negroes who had made their break with Harlem. They were as far as her other friends from any world Baby could feel comfortable in.

He had stayed only a few minutes, not even removing his coat, drinking the coke she insisted on bringing him, and then saying he had to go. Promising to come back later ("They'll be gone by seven-thirty," she'd told him, "and I've got dinner all planned for us") but not coming back. And not calling her. Not that night and not for three long days—until his call from camp a few minutes ago

that she had really not expected. For throughout the few weeks they'd known each other, she felt that each time he left her was the last time she would ever see him; knowing that their relationship was held together by her own will alone; that whatever she might mean to him, was probably not enough to compensate him for the awkwardness of knowing her. It occurred to her: He's never once even asked about birth control. Even that has been my responsibility—like everything else.

She drank her drink down to the ice cubes, then stared at them, a nest of three translucent stones—shaking them once as if needing a sound she herself made to awaken her from the strange mood his call had produced in her. She should have felt some sort of lift, but his reluctance depressed her. His training rules, she thought, getting up and going into the kitchen. But there weren't any training rules until yesterday.

She remembered as she fixed herself another drink that she'd forgotten to eat lunch. But not wanting food now. Wanting—something else—that elusive invitation that had been teasing her mind for so many years and that appeared, now as the inviting shadow of adventures she longed for but seldom found, now as the menacing shadow of her own destruction. Could they, she wondered, holding her whiskey and soda up to the window to see if the colour was dark enough, could they possibly both be one and the same desire—in the way that I can love him just because it is such a desperate thing to love him—such an annihilating thing?

3

THE FAINT SLAP of the cards, a faucet dripping, Louie clearing his throat to say, "Raise you," somebody, probably Sonny Boy, whistling off key a song that Baby knew but couldn't name, somebody else snoring in another room. . . . He reached out and picked up the clock and looked at it, more to check on the fact that he wasn't just dreaming all this than because he cared what time it was. Then lay listening.

"I don't see why I couldn't catch me a workout at the Uptown," Sonny Boy was saying. "What's the difference I work out here, I work out there? I mean just for a day or two."

The cards slapped all around the table out there again, Baby counted four hands, and then Louie said, "It's not what you do right while you're in training. It's what you do wrong. You can do a hundred right things, and one wrong thing, and the wrong thing will spoil all the right things."

"What wrong thing?" Sonny Boy asked.

"You know what I mean."

"Pass," Ronnie said.

"I *don't* know what you mean," said Sonny Boy.

"What wrong thing?"

Louie laughed. "Man you're really a hard boy to say

no to. I mean¹ some wrong thing with two arms and two legs and hair about down to here and tits about /out to *here*—keepin you busy all Saturday night and Sunday. If you think that tiger you're trying out with next Friday is gonna be crippled, you got another think comin."

"Gimme one," Tree Top said. "Corvin took care Eggar in two rounds."

"Who'd Eggar *ever* beat?" Sonny Boy whined. "Two cards. How come Baby can do it and I can't?"

"Baby don't fight for most of a month yet, one thing," Louie said. "Another thing, maybe when you're Baby you have a little more leeway too. But you're not Baby yet."

"What's he goin in for?" Tree Top asked. "Business?"

Baby heard a muffled giggle, then a lot of silence. He figured somebody was making a face or a sign.

He got up, went into the bathroom and washed the sleep out of his face, combed his hair down slick with pomade, and went back into the bedroom and started dressing. Ronnie was the only one who knew about her—not her name, just the facts—and Ronnie wasn't the kind of boy to talk. But why the hell had he told him, anyhow? Maybe because he'd had to tell *somebody*. Not that he was proud of it or ashamed of it but because it was so goddamn strange. It didn't seem real, the way it had all come about, driving down there after her phone call and the whole crazy evening. And Ronnie was the only good friend he had; the only one he really cared about among this bunch—as a friend. Louie was like his old man, the old man he'd never had; and matter of fact they were all like a family—Sonny Boy and Teddy like a couple of

jerk kid brothers; Spunky Rowles like that half-blind old uncle who'd come to live with them when he was a little kid—even looked like him, now that he thought about it. And I'm *this* family's breadwinner, Baby thought. That's why I can do what I feel like doing, case Sonny Boy don't know.

"What's she got to offer *you*?" Ronnie had said when he told him a couple of nights after he stayed with her that first time. "That's the kind will make *you* break training and come on the run whenever she takes a notion. And what do you get out of it 'cept a few free lays? You got everything comin your way now—you don't want to let somebody like that mess things up."

"She's got nothin to offer me," Baby told him, "and I don't see I've got anything special to offer her. It don't make sense—that's why I kind of like it."

"Take my advice," Ronnie had said. "Don't like it too much."

And the little yellow-faced bastard had been right. Here he was breaking training today, going into town, and he didn't even *want* to break training and go into town. But there'd been something about the way she sounded on the phone, as if her life depended on it, that was making him do it. She must be a little off her rocker, he thought, putting on his coat. She's an artist, so I guess that explains everything.

Yet even as he explained her away so easily, he felt that other reason, that truer one he couldn't accept, hovering in the back of his mind—that vague thing called "love" or "passion" or whatever, that was its own excuse, its own law, and the only thing with a will strong enough to pull him out of here today

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said, going into the big room.

"Man, I wish somebody invite *me* to a ball," Spunky Rowles said from the kitchen doorway, sizing Baby's outfit up and down.

Louie was drawing a pile of poker chips to him with both hands. "Let me know if anything happens you can't get back.

Baby glanced at Ronnie, thinking for a moment that he had told. But Ronnie was busy shuffling the cards; he didn't return the look.

"Like what?" Baby asked.

Louie was smiling, a forced kind of smile. "I just mean, so we know where we stand up here."

"Okay," Baby said. He moved toward the door. "Take it easy. Don't get up too much of a sweat, Sonny Boy."

"You be back for supper tomorrow, then?" Spunky Rowles asked.

"I might even be back for dinner," Baby told him, and went out into the clean air and got into the new red Cadillac convertible with the blond leather seats and the whitewall tyres and drove slowly down the driveway, out to the road that went winding down the cold mountain.

He smelled the bottle the minute she opened the door, and saw it too in the lackadaisical way she stood there leaning on the doorknob, a crooked little smile on her face, a lock of short honey hair curled over her eye, the eyes themselves bigger than he'd ever seen them and filled with a kind of strained humour that made him uneasy.

"Mr. Paris James of Greenwood Lake," she said.
"What a pleasant surprise."

She closed the door after him and leaned against it with her hands behind her still on the knob, her face still fixed in that funny smile.

"Looks like somebody's havin a party for herself," he said.

"No," Laine said, "it was a wake."

He glanced around the room. He smelled turpentine.

"What was awake?"

"I almost died, not seeing you." Abruptly she came over to him, not putting her arms around him, merely standing so close that every part of her, from her head fitted closely under his chin, to her knees touching his knees, was taut against him. "So I've been celebrating prematurely . . . I wish you could celebrate with me."

"That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

"I wish you drank. I'd like to get drunk with you."

He ran his hand over the firm brown corduroy, down her back. "You sound like the devil—you want to get me killed."

"Do I?" She stepped back with a bright, teasing expression that was new. "And all the while I've been thinking you were *my* devil."

He took off his coat and threw it across the arm of the couch—looking at her uneasily, the drinking she'd been doing giving her some new dimensions he couldn't get in focus. "I don't get it."

"You make me want to do the most reckless things," Laine said. "You make me want to throw myself away for you—whatever's left of me to throw away."

"You're a crazy girl," Baby said.

"And not even a girl. I'm thirty-two, didn't you know? . . . Sit down, I'm going to freshen my drink."

"Yeah, don't forget to do that," he said to her back as she went into the kitchen.

And when she returned her glass was full, and she sat on the floor in front of him, looking up. "Do you really think I'm crazy—at thirty-two?"

"You're crazy at any age," Baby said.

"Why?"

"You just said the reason—because you want to throw yourself away."

"I want to throw myself away on beauty and courage—on life." Laine said. "Don't you see? I want to throw myself away on you."

"You got me mixed up with two other people. I'm not any of those things."

"You're all those things."

"And it don't go anywhere," he said. "Maybe you oughta be thinking where you're goin—what you'll be doing five years from now."

"I'll trade it all for right now. For seeing you and knowing you."

"And then what?" he asked, watching the free swing of her breast in the corduroy as she reached for an ashtray on the end table. "After seeing me and knowing me, what? You'll go on and see and know somebody else, right?"

She turned her head away so he couldn't see her face. "No, I won't go on," she said. "I don't want to go on from you."

He wished he smoked or drank. All he could do to fill the silence was shift his feet on the rug.

Then in a single movement that he had to admire

because you had to be good to do it, she stood straight up from the floor. "Do you notice something new here, Paris?" Her voice was so abruptly cheerful he frowned. "I've been working like hell this week."

His eye followed her gesture to the corner where a painting, unframed, still glistening with varnish, stood on an easel. He went over and looked and all he could make out at first were long red threads of paint, like blood, streaming down from top to bottom. They were three-dimensional and highlighted. Realistic. You felt like reaching out and touching them to see if they were sticky. Behind the blood it was all whites and grays and browns, lights and shadows—a square of gray or white repeated all sizes over the canvas. And something like spotlights—and ropes—ring ropes, they came in threes—crossing the canvas diagonally both ways and making a big lopsided cross that X'd out what he suddenly saw the patchwork became after you looked at it long enough. A face. A negro's face in a puzzle behind the blood. He guessed, staring at it for a while, it was his own.

"Jesus Christ!"

She laughed and came over and stood beside him. "No, not quite Jesus Christ. I meant it to be you."

"I know," he said. "You scare me out of ten years' growth."

"I saw it—when was it?—Tuesday morning. While I was still half asleep—and still dreaming, I suppose. And I worked all day and half the night on it."

"What made you paint something like that?"

"Because I saw it—I guess you have to paint what you see—but I didn't know it was you until I was half finished. I mean, your face suddenly came out of the ring lights

and ropes and everything—that's what all that's supposed to be in the background."

"You mean that's what I'm going to look like when Jorgensen gets through with me? I better start in training double time."

"No, it doesn't mean that at all." She reached out and turned it face down. She was frowning. "Don't say anything like that—what I paint has nothing to do with your fight with Jorgensen." What was she so upset about all of a sudden? "Oh, Paris, let's go out, I'm *desperately* hungry."

He watched her in amazement as she hurried into the next room. She seemed all worked up now—from what he'd said about the picture? He couldn't figure her.

Especially when she came back all dressed for going out in a black belted raincoat and a little round black hat that made her firm blond good looks shine. She seemed to have spotlights trained on her. She was the whitest woman that ever lived—and he was the blackest man.

"You wanta go someplace around here?" he asked uneasily.

"Anywhere you say. We could go to Guido's over on Macdougall Street. And drink Chianti out of a basket bottle and eat plates and plates of spaghetti—and scaloppine alla marsala."

"It's not my day for goin to a white place," Baby said.

"Well, it isn't as white as all that. But I don't care. We'll go anywhere you say."

"Okay, let me think."

He thought on the stairs and by the time they got to the

street he thought where to go. "Let's go to Chinatown. It's a place on Doyers Street where you eat downstairs. You know it?"

She didn't know it, but she was willing to go.

With a dusty wind blowing up from Sheridan Square in their faces, they crossed the street walking toward his car—when they heard it. A hiss, a low *Sssssssst* that made him look around to see only an empty winter street with a few bleak trees and its cold brick buildings solid along either side. Then he saw: three young hoods standing in a doorway across the street, probably Italian kids seventeen or eighteen years old, one of them fat, wearing a wool pullover with an eagle on it, the other two shrimps. Without thinking about it one way or the other, without even getting mad, he started for them, but Laine got in front of him.

"Please," she said. "Please."

Then like a wave his anger hit him, flooding his face with warm blood. "Watch out, Laine." He pushed her aside like an annoying little dog, but she held on to his arm.

"Come on," she said. "*Please* don't—they don't matter."

In the moment he looked down at her white imploring face, the three boys themselves decided things. They ducked inside the house.

"They meant me," he said, holding open the car door for her.

"They meant us," Laine said. "But you'd be wasting your beautiful hands. The Village is full of toughs like them, hanging around in groups. They love it when they're three or four against one."

He didn't speak as he headed the car east.

"Please don't be angry," Laine said. "They don't really matter at all."

He was disturbed by the anger, which had passed now, leaving his body light and weak. It was one of the emotions he couldn't afford in his business—one he'd long ago relegated to some dim, triple-locked vault deep inside him.

"Paris." She was trying to see into his face.

But he didn't answer and they drove in silence.

"I always get mixed up in these streets," he said finally as if nothing had happened. "Wait a minute, I think that's the one, it's too narrow to get in there with the car."

He parked in front of a Chinese herb store, locked the car, and led her along a tiny twisting alley to a door with steep steps dropping down into a restaurant. A big bare place, only a few customers—some of them Chinese—sitting at tables scattered around the room.

They sat in the corner, facing one another. "I'm always glad to see Chinese eating in Chinese restaurants and Italians eating in Italian restaurants," Laine said. "Makes me think the food may really be good."

Baby glanced at the three Chinamen hunched over plates heaped high with rice and lobster at the next table.

"It's a pretty good place," he told her. "You get enough to eat."

A slender pokerfaced Chinaman, dressed casually in floppy slippers and black work pants and white shirt, came staggering in from the kitchen under an enormous tray stacked with what looked like enough food for a party of twenty, put it on a serving table near the three

Chinamen, and began transferring everything to their table.

"Are they actually going to eat all that, too?" Laine asked.

"They'll eat all that *and* some more."

She soon was seeing what he meant after Baby ordered the six-dollar dinner and the waiter arrived with the first course, won ton soup and a big bowl of some kind of greens with gravy over them—coming back again and again with all sorts of dishes—rice, sweet and sour pork, lobster, and you name it—until the table top was covered and the dinner had turned into a feast. These Chinese really eat, he thought, but he wasn't enjoying it. More people were crowding in now because it was after seven, and all of them threw long looks this way. He wondered how she felt being stared at—and poured some tea for both of them, watching her as she lit a cigarette.

"I *can't* go on," she smiled over at him. "I've never seen so much food in my life."

"Let's leave. The air's getting thick in here."

She pushed her tea away. "I'm with you."

But he couldn't get the waiter. He flirted with the waiter for five minutes, turning first one way on his chair, then the other; raising his hand like a kid in school. Finally he sat back. "He'll come around one of these tables in a minute and I'll grab him."

She wasn't listening. He thought God himself must have walked in, the way she was staring over his shoulder.

"What's the matter?"

"But that's Dick Willis over there. The man with the girl in the red jacket."

"He a friend of yours?"

"But you know Dick—he introduced us. That first night at the Tavern."

"Oh, yeah." That little half-amused, half-bitter smile showed on his face. "I guess you're real happy to see him here, ain't you?"

"I wonder if he's seen us? He won't believe his eyes when he sees us together."

He watched her emotional face, feeling a bitter kind of amusement in her nervousness. When he got the waiter he paid the bill and added a buck and said, "All set?"

"Yes." But she sounded a little anxious. "I'll stop for a second and say hello."

It was something to see, the sports writer's amazed wide-open face when he looked up and there the two of them were, standing by his table. He wiped his mouth and scraped his chair back both in the same movement.

"Well, Laine. Hello, there. And Baby James . . ."

"We're just leaving," Laine said. "Watch yourself. They've served us so much we can hardly walk out."

And then she was going up the stairs and Baby was turning, with a little movement of his hand to say so long, and climbing after her.

"Imagine seeing him there," Laine said on the street.

"You can't get away from him or any of your friends." They were walking toward the car. "They'll turn up wherever you go—even way down here in Chinatown."

She looked up at him. "I don't understand why you're saying this."

"You weren't very happy having him see us together, were you?"

"Why, I wasn't happy or unhappy. He doesn't mean anything to me. It was just that I knew he'd be surprised,

because I haven't told him we've been seeing each other."

He unlocked the car and held the door open for her while she got in.

"You got to care," he said, slipping in beside her. "It wouldn't be human if you didn't care."

"Care about what?"

"Bout all your friends knowin you're running around with a spook."

"A spook? What's a spook?"

"A negro—like me."

"But I don't care! As a matter of fact I'm proud of it—I'm proud of you."

He switched on his parking lights and let the car roll down the street in first, turning left under the El. He was shaking his head, that slight twist of a smile on his heavy lips. "You must be crazy," Baby said. "You oughta see a head doctor."

She sat almost sidewise on the seat, studying him. She lit a cigarette and he could see her hands tremble with the match. He wondered whether that was just the drinking or something else.

And then she spoke. "I wish you were proud of me."

He didn't answer.

"Because isn't that what you really mean? You're putting your own feelings about me in my mouth. You're the one who took me to obscure little restaurants where nobody you knew ever came—like Patsy's and that place in Spanish Harlem. And tonight."

"Maybe you're right." He wet his lips.

"And I'm the one who invited everyone I knew over to a party so they could see me with you."

"Yeah, that's right," Baby said.

"It is right, isn't it?"

"It's right."

There was a lot of silence in the car then.

"Here we are," he said, pulling up in front of her door.

"I guess I'll go on."

"Go on where?"

"Go on about my business—back to camp."

Her hand was on his arm. He saw in the dimness the shine of tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Paris!"

She moved over to him, curled against his chest like a small animal seeking shelter from the weather. He felt trapped by the tears. He put his arm around her.

But high heels coming up the street made her stir. She sat up and dried her eyes. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke—he thought she might be ready to start pleading with him.

"You don't want to stay with me tonight?"

"It don't go anywhere," Baby said. "It's bad for everybody. It's worst of all for you."

"It's what I want and it's all I've got. I think I should be the judge of what's bad for me. I've even begun to paint again since I met you. I feel alive again."

"That's crazy talk," he said. "You do the same things with me you'd do with any other man—only it's rougher on you, goin around with me. You didn't feel so good meeting that friend of yours tonight—I could see that."

She looked out the window and he hoped she wasn't going to cry again.

"You're not the same as any other man." She sounded, maybe because her face was turned away from him, a long

way off. "And I'm not the same as any other woman. Seeing you that night—that first night—when I went to the fights with Dick—you were like a vision of courage, and beauty too. It sounds silly, doesn't it? You were like a vision of courage in the face of death—and I'd so often wanted to die. But that night I saw—it was a kind of revelation to me—I saw that a person can only be beautiful and brave and *right* when he's involved in life, when he's keeping death away from him. It doesn't matter how cruel life is—or even how terrible the things are you have to do to live. The important thing is to live, and be as graceful as you can doing it—as graceful as you were that night, if possible. And as brave."

"I can't keep up with you," he said. "All this beauty and courage you keep talking about." He thought a minute. "You want to know the reason I'm a fighter?"

"Tell me."

"For money," he said, and touched the trim blond steering wheel of the Cadillac. "For this car and these clothes. That's all I'm in it for. I'm not in it because I like to hit somebody or get hit. You got to be real dumb to be in it for that—but I seen guys like that. They like to get hit so much they don't know where they are by the time they're thirty. Their ears are all beat out of shape and they can't see out of their eyes and they don't know their right name. Those are the brave guys. Not me. I don't like to fight. The minute I start slowing down I'm getting out." He looked at her. "You got me mixed up with some movie star or war hero," he said.

Yet even as he said it he knew her words had pleased some secret part of himself he never recognized. He had seen himself described a thousand times in other terms

—the sports-page terms of hitting and getting hit, of “blinding speed” the way they called his style, and “cat-like combination puncher” and “the killing instincts of a champion.” But nobody ever mentioned his “beauty” before, that would be a queer word to read in the sports pages, that would be the big laugh around the Half ’n Half and the Tavern and Stillman’s.

“I can see you don’t understand.” She sounded weary as she slipped the strap of her leather pocketbook over her shoulder and put her hand on the doorhandle. “Do you want me to get out now? Are you going?”

“I’ll walk you up to the door,” Baby said.

“You don’t have to. It doesn’t matter.”

He watched her as she slipped out, feeling vaguely sorry for her, not as if she was somebody he knew but somebody in a movie whom he had no connection with except a vague secondhand knowledge of the troubles and mistakes that had brought her to this weary moment. She was going up the stoop now, through the door. He put the car keys in his pocket and followed, not speaking as he climbed the stairs behind her, reaching each landing just as she was turning at the one above. She didn’t look around, but when she got to her door, her key already out, she waited for him.

“Please don’t come in, Paris. You really ought to go back to camp tonight—I was wrong to call you there. I probably am your devil; I probably would destroy you if you let me.”

“I could use some coffee.”

She smiled. There was that strand of blond hair over her forehead. She really was like a stranger now—like that character in a movie.

"You don't have to let me down easy," she said. "I think if you're going you ought to go now, that's all. I'll come to see you at the Jorgensen fight—and I'll be yelling for you to win. And please call me after the fight—when you feel free again. Will you?"

She held out her hand to him as if there had been nothing more than a few laughs over dinner between them. He was wearing his gloves, so that was all she got from him—the leather of his gloves. She unlocked the door and switched on the light inside and faced him in the half-open door.

"Goodnight."

"You all right?" he asked.

"I'm all right. And call me after the training's over—after you've won the fight."

He felt an urgent jump of life in his groin as the door closed and left him standing there in the hall alone, her footsteps disappearing into the apartment, the bell beside the door inviting him to ring it.

But he didn't.

Remembering that this was after all what he wanted, what he'd decided on at camp, what he had brought about—he turned and started down the stairs, going faster and faster on each flight, his feet tap-tap-tapping in a Bojangles rhythm, his hat in the hand he'd caught it with when it jumped off his head a quarter of the way down.

Back in the car with just the dashboard lights on, he sat very still for a while, feeling that he'd forgotten something, half convinced that he'd brought something valuable down from camp and left it up there in that apartment. But it was just a passing feeling. He knew,

as he pushed the starter and fed the gas, that whatever it was he'd left was better off, for all concerned, behind him.

He headed for Harlem—for the Tavern and for a girl. Tomorrow morning early he'd drive back to camp and stay there.

4

LYING FACE DOWN on the rubdown table, hands taped, cup and trunks and socks and boxing shoes on, robe thrown over him though it was warm in the room, he heard beyond the door the crowd's drawn-out *awwwwww* like the roar a car makes racing through a short tunnel—knowing from hearing it a hundred times before what it was.

Somebody got it, he thought.

And by the time Ronnie came in saying, "That's it, here we go," Baby had flipped himself off the table and started bouncing on his toes, limbering his arms by shooting them out, rolling his head to loosen his neck muscles, ducking and dodging. His face had lost its slightly sardonic look now, it was bright and eager, the eyes were bright with expectancy as if some shiny prize he'd been waiting a lifetime for were about to be his.

But this wasn't the prize tonight. Only the next thing to it.

He stopped moving while Tree Top draped the towel over his head, brought it around and crossed it over his chest, then picked up the robe that had fallen on the floor and held it while Baby shoved his arms into it. Baby tied the sash. Doc Stacy picked up the medicine kit. Spunky Rowles picked up the ice bucket and the

gold-plated spittoon. Tree Top carried extra towels and the water bottle. Ronnie carried nothing. And following Louie, they went out through the door, down a corridor, and through another door into the great arena.

Far down there at the end of the aisle they walked along was the small white impersonal ring, brass-cornered and red-roped. Cigarette smoke lay in a fretful blue fog above the audience, and like some massive generator starting up, a hum of conversation rose as the main-event fighters came out—Jorgensen and his handlers on the opposite side of the arena already almost to the ring. But Baby looked neither at Jorgensen nor at these people around him who stared and called and clapped. He looked straight ahead, his face uninvolved, his eyes alive, his whole being paced to the ten rounds ahead.

Trailing behind him and behind his handlers were the thirty-two dedicated days they had lived and worked together: the isolation, the schedule, the impersonal labour concerned only with the body: the body's staying power, the body's speed, the body's power to punish another body. And somewhere behind all that, for Baby, were the years of his life that seemed to lead up to and through this moment to a brighter moment a few months away, and on beyond that, as champion, to more wealth than any of his friends had ever known. To gold and glory.

He did not think of any of this, but he took it all along with him as he climbed up the steps and ducked between the top and second ropes, which Tree Top held, on into the ring. He took along the paper-littered Harlem streets, the shoeshine box, the first street fights, the gym in the basement of the Harlem church where he'd sparred

around at fourteen, the bootleg fights in places like Danbury and Fall River and Scranton when he was fifteen and the youngest member of Louie Jackson's stable of fifteen-dollars-a-night, two-or-three-nights-a-week fighters, the nickname "Baby" they'd hung on him because he was the youngest fighter Louie had, the Golden Gloves welterweight title, and finally the first pro fights—a dozen of them, all wins, before the Army got him and shoved him into a quartermaster battalion driving a truck.

He took all that along with him as he shed his robe and began dancing on his toes, breathing evenly, making no gestures toward the crowd, looking at no one. And he took along too his essential shrewdness: keeping Louie for a manager when he came out of the war, but owning himself; sacrificing his fun to his training; sacrificing everything he knew and cared about, including that crazy girl, to the one thing he wanted, the championship, which only one man at a time could hold and which was the only thing worth having in a business where you had either the nickels or the nuggets—either the few thousand dollars' non-title-bout money, or the hundred grand a champion could draw.

The announcer, the only man here in evening clothes, was in the middle of the ring now, the lowered mike in his hand. "Ladies and gentlemen, our national anthem." As an organ played it, everybody stood. Afterward everybody sat back down and Tree Top went across the ring to watch Jorgensen's gloves being tied on while one of Jorgensen's seconds, a skinny, sharp-faced man buttoned up in the handler's regulation white sweater, came over to watch Doc tie on Baby's. "We have some eminent celebrities at ringside tonight," the announcer said.

Old Joe Louis climbed through the ropes and touched Baby's glove, saying "Good luck," then went over to pay the same respects to Jorgensen. And other fighters who were only ringside watchers tonight came up one by one—broken-nosed wop kids from the Lower East Side, the scarred sons of New England mill families and Pennsylvania coal miners, the pokerfaced coloured boys from Harlem—crossing the ring from corner to corner in the full drape that fighters favour, waving a hand to the mild wave of applause that ran across the audience.

"Main event, ten rounds."

As Baby and Jorgensen and their seconds and the referee huddled in the middle of the ring ("*You boys are both acquainted wit duh rules of the New York State Athletic Commission*"), Baby stood staring at a spot about a foot above Jorgensen's bald head, feeling Tree Top's hand lightly massaging his neck and back. He didn't listen to the talk ("*Watch your low blows cause it may cost you the round*"), he listened to the month of training and the plan: Don't give him boxing lessons this time the way he'd done a year ago to take a decision. Get him early and get him good. If he had to beat everybody twice before they'd let him fight Aldi, then beat them all so good they never want to fight him again. Jorgensen was thirty-three and slowing down; he'd got by the best in his day, but this year he was ready for the provinces or retirement. He was in here tonight as I.B.C.-boy Aldi's decoy—to soften Baby up before Aldi had to fight him, or even change his life with one of those windmilling punches that could still ruin you if they connected. So take no chances. Lead him, tire him till he left himself open, then combination-punch him to death.

He was in his corner now, robe off, mouthpiece in, dancing lightly on his toes, looking across the ring at the same spot a foot above the head of Jorgensen, who sat on his stool, his thin legs and bulging arms spread-eagled, his lean pink creased face with its close-set blue eyes eager and anxious. The bell rang and they met in the middle of the ring, touching gloves while the referee held them apart—then Baby jabbed him twice, hooked him once, and back-pedalled neatly out of range, working him like a man working a big fish on a line, never letting him get set but encouraging the two-handed, free-swinging, stand-up kind of fighting that Jorgensen liked to do—encouraging him to do it against the thin air.

The deception—to finish him fast but with as little punishment as possible to himself—began to pay off when Jorgensen, in the last minute of the second round, abruptly stopped dead in his tracks as if realizing that Baby was only leading him on to tire him out, and Baby quickly reversed the backward direction he'd been taking in stepping in and out and away from Jorgensen's two good hands. Moving fast straight in toward the right, he hit him three fast jabs to the left eye, a right cross to the heart, and a left hook to the side of the jaw. Jorgensen fell in against him, shaken to his toes by the hook, breathing hard into Baby's ear, holding Baby's arms down while he stood flatfooted trying to keep his legs from falling away.

"Break it up."

Baby shook him off, pushed him away, and saw in the childish look of bewilderment in Jorgensen's double-barrelled eyes that he might be close to having him. He went in to get him and Jorgensen, fading backward,

bewildered, fighting a defensive fight that wasn't his kind of fight at all, bleeding from the left eye and desperate, felt the red ropes in his back and had to fight or fall. He fought wildly with big looping swings, the first to the side of the head blocked by Baby's glove, the second on Baby's rolling shoulder, the third grazing Baby's left eye and opening a tiny cut that shot a warm trickle of blood down his cheek. He was busy at Jorgensen's head but the chin was held so close to the chest he couldn't get a clean shot. Working on the eyes, he saw the nose redden and gush blood and saw the right eye swelling under the pat-pat-pat of his left hand. Jorgensen grabbed and held, and when they parted, Baby's arms were wet with Jorgensen's sweat and his shoulder was brushed with blood from Jorgensen's nose. Wanting him at longer range for cleaner shots, he tried to lead him out away from the ropes by teasing him with long lefts, but Jorgensen wouldn't lead, he stood like a rock in his tracks, covered up and stalling for the bell.

"You get him this round if you really go," Louie said in the corner while he smeared the cut with vaseline and Tree Top tilted the water bottle for Baby to rinse and Doc Stacy held a wet sponge to the back of his neck. "He think you're gonna lead him again, so maybe you oughta go in fast and body-punch him to get his right down, then get in some good ones to the head."

Baby spit the water into the spittoon.

"That jaw's just like it growed to his chest," Louie said. "But it'll loosen up you hit him in the body and the eyes and leave off the jaw till he's not suspectin."

Tree Top pulled out the front of Baby's trunks for free breathing and Doc swabbed him lightly with the sponge

wet with water and the illegal vaseline that seconds used to make the punches slide off easier. At the ten-second warning buzzer Baby stood up and rolled his shoulders, slid his soles on the rosin. Jorgensen was still sitting down over there, leaning back tired on the ropes. Bell, and Baby drove straight across the ring, right held high and back like an urgent message he delivered hard to the heart, leaning into it with a follow-through of his whole body and hooking twice into the kidney with his left; flowing out of close quarters like a knot effortlessly untying itself; evading a right, accepting a left on his glove nestled safe at home under his jaw, and stinging a long left twin-tease to the face. Jorgensen's clumsy look told Baby he was easier now than a year ago; he was ready to go. But the crowd wanted it rougher. They were yelling for Jimmy, the blind courage of the big stand-up-and-fight white man who knew only how to keep coming on and taking punches and coming on again—defeating better fighters by his very stubbornness and strength, encouraging them to bruise and break their hands on his bony head and hard body while he kept coming on to win. It was his kind of punch-happy campaign more than Baby's cool efficiency that had drawn all these people out of their bars and apartments on a cold night in March. But it was these same people who could change their loyalty in a moment when they saw the end near. What they'd really come to see was the blood, the pain, the grotesque agony of the knockout, and they were sensing it now, leaning forward in their seats with a growl of joy as Baby found the heart again, yelling, "Come on, Jimmy," meaning, "Come on and kill Jimmy," "Keep fighting while he kills you, Jimmy."

. . . . She sat a dozen rows back, the only women here who had come alone, the only person here who was tense and quiet in the face of what was happening up there in that brilliant velvet-roped square. She felt, as she had never felt before, his distance from her; the alien nature of what he did. For where before she knew him the sight of him had brought out in her an urgent need to lose herself in his beauty and his violence, tonight, having known him and loved him, she felt only the distance his leather-and-blood world put between them. She hardly wanted to look as Baby, after his man in earnest now, followed Jorgensen around the ring, in and out of the corners, along the ropes, loosening him up for the knock-out he wanted tonight but heedful of those throwaway rights and lefts that had gotten Jorgensen out of other scrapes like this. She thought, Win it, win it—not meaning win it with all this blood. Meaning win it in some bloodless legendary sense that had awakened in her childhood and made her commit all the desperately romantic acts of her life. Win it as the handsome knight slew the ugly dragon in the childhood picture book; as slender David killed the monstrous giant in the Bible. But in the pulpy red mask that had once been Jorgensen's face she saw now the truth about all victories in real life. And remembering the violent painting of Baby's head she had felt compelled to do so many weeks ago, she saw that her vision had been wrong; that it was his antagonist who really deserved her compassion, while Baby in his strength and speed and efficiency remained somehow aloof, almost inhuman, no one she had ever known.

Everybody was standing—she couldn't see. She stood too, the ring blocked out by the man in front of her.

Craning on tip-toe to see, she saw the referee kneeling, counting his arm switching the air over Jorgensen stretched flat, Baby standing in a far corner staring across at his opponent, a tear of blood running down his cheek from the cut eye, his arms still half cocked for action.

The bell—it wasn't a knockout yet. Jorgensen's three seconds scrambled into the ring and hustled him, half dragging, half walking, to his corner. Would it really go on? An elderly man in a dark blue suit, it must be the ring doctor, was up there talking to Jorgensen, looking into his eyes. And he was nodding to the referee—they were actually going to let him go out for another round.

She wanted to leave, but an obligation to see it all, to view unflinchingly this thing she'd talked so glibly about, compelled her to stay.

"Some fight, eh? He'll kill him this round."

A pasty-faced teenager wearing a yellow sweater under a sport jacket was staring eagerly at her through heavy horn-rimmed glasses. In his excitement he'd twisted his programme in half—a piece still in each hand.

"I hope they stop it," Laine said. She looked back at the ring, not wanting to talk to anyone now, only wanting all this to be over like a bloody nightmare that had never happened.

But the boy, one of those soft, rather shy boys who could never be boxers and who cannot really afford the price of a ringside ticket but spend all their money going to fights because they see their most secret dreams enacted there, had to say something to somebody. "They won't stop it," he told her, chewing on his lip, blinking those wide eyes. "They'd stop it if it was just some punks in a prelim, but this is too important to both of them."

"It'll all be over soon," Laine said.

The red lights on the ring posts flashed, and for the first time she was watching Jorgensen instead of Baby as the fighters came out of their corners. He was still holding up his hands, moving forward more steadily than she'd thought he possibly could; but even she who knew nothing about boxing saw what he wanted to do. He wanted to hold on, not fight. Baby was eluding him, shaking off his arms and hitting him and moving away not to avoid blows but to avoid being held. Jorgensen's right eye sat deep in a mound of purple flesh; the whole side of his face was swollen. And all around her people were screaming, "Feed him that right, Baby!" "Hook him, Baby!" "Go! Go!"

She turned her eyes away, but a moment later punished herself by looking at the ring again. And Jorgensen was lying back against the ropes now, not even trying to land a blow, only trying to evade the mashing smack-smack of Baby's gloves. Baby backed up to let him come off the ropes and as he did, sidestepped neatly and gave them what they were yelling for. Hooked him hard to that jaw that no longer rode tightly on its chest but was an easy target now, a blind target. Hooked him again and crossed with a cleaver right in a fifteen-inch arc dead on the chin that tilted his head into regarding for an endless reverent moment the American flag suspended in darkness high above the ring. He fell, turning slowly from the ankles up—stiff and awesome like a giant tree notched at the base and chopped with a final axe blow; his head bouncing once on the canvas, his mouthpiece flying out, his mottled fish-white body laid perfectly flat and still.

The same thick silence that settled over the packed arena settled over Baby's mind as he stood in his corner, his robe on again and his gloves removed, watching the huddle of kneeling and standing figures around Jorgensen. A couple of cops climbed through the ropes. Flashbulbs winked around the ring apron as the announcer brayed: "The time, one minute and thirty-two seconds of the fourth round. The winner, by a knock-out"—motioning Baby over and holding up his hand—"James!"

As modest applause floated up, Baby looked down at ring-side and saw a lot of people he knew. There was Louie's wife Winnie and some of the guys who hung around the Tavern and some of the sports writers who'd been over at camp in the past couple of weeks. Waving when his sister Analee with some cat-slick boyfriend of hers yelled something at him from the fifth or sixth row, he forgot to smile.

"Whole building shook when he hit," Tree Top said.

Over the heads of the kneeling handlers, Baby looked down into that narrow pink-and-white face—eyes closed, mouth flabby and torn. He picked up Jorgensen's mouthpiece off the canvas.

"He all right?" he asked the doc.

But the doc's ears were plugged up with the stethoscope.

It was when he dropped the mouthpiece into a handler's sweater pocket and turned to go back to his own corner that he saw Laine Brendan in her black raincoat pushing her way through a row of the standing audience, hurrying toward the exit. She looked alone. Seeing her made him feel alone, and unclean, too. He felt more like he'd lost

the fight than won it. Why the hell was Jorgensen taking so long to get up?

They had him on a stretcher now, easing him down through the ropes, carrying him through the crowd.

"Let's go," Louie said.

"I think he's hurt bad," Baby said.

"He's just good and out," Louie told him. "Come on, what we hanging around here for?"

But he knew, as he followed Louie and the cop up the aisle, that he was right and Louie was wrong. He knew it with some sixth sense that came out of that brutal intimacy a moment ago in the ring—as though, having been wiped with his opponent's sweat and blood and having tested his strength over the distance of three and a half rounds, he had gained some deeper knowledge of his man that doctors and handlers and ringsiders couldn't have.

"I think he's had it," Baby said in the dressing-room as Tree Top cut the tape from his right hand with scissors. "Keep the reporters out of here, I don't want to see anybody.

"We can't keep em out," Ronnie said. "Here they come now."

They came crowding in, half a dozen brassy professionals, among them a wispy little man who looked like a minister and a grave, handsome, forty-five-year-old negro from the *Amsterdam News* whom Baby had always vaguely disliked and Harvey Bieberman, a boxing editor who had a radio programme Baby had once been on—None of them ever fighters, all of them full of those same weary questions that Baby had answered a hundred times before.

"Which punch did you knock him out with, Baby?"

A flashbulb exploded. Baby glanced over at a photographer standing on a chair.

"It was a lot of punches," he said. "It was those last two hooks that set him up for the right. How is he?"

"They took him over the hospital."

Tree Top unlaced and pulled off his boxing shoes and took off his socks.

"Did he hurt you at all?"

"He never hurt me," Baby said, standing up and stepping out of his trunks and cup, tying the sash on his robe. "It was all easy—easier than I expected."

"Easier than when you fought him last year?"

"A lot easier. He's slowed up a lot."

A flashbulb made him blink.

"What are your plans now?"

"They're the same as they were last month and the month before that," Baby told the wispy man. "I want to fight Aldi. That's all I want."

Half an hour later they all piled into the Cadillac, Ronnie driving and headed uptown.

"Are we goin to the Tavern?" Ronnie asked Baby. "Or someplace else?"

"Make it the Tavern."

"Your mother told me be sure and remind you to call her."

"Yeah, I'll call her."

There were always a lot of people in the Tavern on the nights Baby fought; the curb in front was lined double with cars. As he shoved in through the crush, somebody started clapping and somebody else said "Yoo-hoo, Champ!" and then the whole place was an uproar of

fat handsmacks and loud cheers. He felt his face break in a smile. A phony smile. He couldn't feel like he'd won at all.

His sister and half a dozen people were at two pushed-together tables in the rear, and he waved to her wave—~~she~~ she looked like she'd won two or three fights herself tonight, decked out in that yellow dress. He found himself eased into the room they'd made for him at the bar. Georgie in his white coat was shaking up something in a cocktail mixer, spray sparkling around his jumping hands.

"I hear you put him to sleep just as *easy*," Georgie said with his biggest, most pleased smile.

"It was too easy," Baby told him, pushing his hat to the back of his head. "Old club fighter."

"He lick a lot of good boys in his day. Maybe it was just easy for *you*."

"I hear they took him over the hospital—you hear anything about that?"

"You really musta laid that leather *to* him," Georgie said. "I didn't hear about that. . . . Have your special?"

"Yeah, and tell Edna make me a thick steak sandwich, I got a hollow place to fill."

Then, he didn't know how she appeared so suddenly because he hadn't seen her until she stood right there beside him, looking at him with that tilted head and those raised eyebrows like she got something on him, there was Clarice, wearing the same tight, redlight-bright satin dress she'd worn the last time he'd seen her here, that night a month ago when he'd taken Laine to Chinatown and come back here to take Clarice to the Delco Hotel.

"Stranger," Clarice said. "Long time no see."

"I been busy with my calisthenics," Baby said. He felt

his body quicken to that neat, long-limbed body of hers; he remembered this perfume she wore, remembering the wild way she made love like a sex machine that manoeuvred its way around as if it had been invented for nothing else. And remembering too how he'd driven back to camp the next morning feeling like an invisible man through whom the sharp sea-smelling air blew at will—a man not thinking of the girl he'd just been with, but the girl he'd walked out on.

"Calis what?" Clarice asked him. Georgie put a vodka collins in front of her.

"My exercises," Baby said. "Fighting keeps you busy."

"Looked wonderful on TV," Clarice said. "That Jorgson or whatever you call him didn't stand a chance—with you." She sipped her drink and slid her eyes in his direction. "You think *I* stand a chance with you, honey?"

"This is my night for sleep," Baby said. "You're gonna have to wait till tomorrow or next day to get the answer."

"What I like about you, you're so *sure* of yourself."

"Yeah," Baby said, and gave her the self-assured grin.

Yet the truth was he'd never felt more unsure of himself in his life. A vague cloud of doom seemed to be hovering somewhere near him—like that night in the blackout off Tunis when they'd begun streaming down the side of the ship into the landing barges and he'd stood waiting his turn, the whole purple African coast out there an alien world of danger different from any danger he'd known on Harlem streets or in the ring because he had no control at all over it, no way to defend himself. He looked at the steaming steak sandwich Georgie slid toward him; he didn't much want it now. He said: "I'll have a beer with this."

"A beer?" Georgie said doubtfully.

The beer came, a defiance of his profession, connecting him up with everyone else here, making him momentarily something less than a fighter and more of a man.

"Look at this," Ronnie said. "What it says in the paper."

"Where you been?"

"I had to run across the street—but look here at this, man."

He looked at the big picture on the front page of the *Daily News*: Jorgensen hitting the canvas, arms and legs sprawling; himself staring down at him in the second before he'd turned and gone to a neutral corner. Then he looked at the headlines above the picture:

FIGHTER DIES AFTER GARDEN K.O.

And a chill wind touched his forehead.

Everyone else in the Tavern seemed to learn the news at exactly the same moment. The high yap of all these people helping him celebrate his victory quieted in the space of a few minutes—the newsboy was just going out the door. Baby turned the page.

BY CHARLES MILES

High-ranking middleweight contender Jimmy Jorgensen, 33, died of a brain hemorrhage at Polyclinic Hospital late last night, half an hour after K.O. artist Paris "Baby" James dropped him for the count in Round 4 of a Madison Square Garden main event.

Jorgensen never regained consciousness after the knock-out.

At the fighter's bedside when he died were his wife Sally and their five-year-old son, James Jr. When the end

came, Mrs. Jorgensen screamed, "He killed him! He killed him!" She was placed under a doctor's care.

SAVED BY BELL

The veteran Brooklyn slugger was on the short end of the 3-1 pre-fight odds in spite of a weight advantage. Jorgensen weighed in at 158, while James, rated No. 6 middleweight contender by the N.B.A., scaled 155.

The fight started fast, with Jorgensen on the offensive, but James used combinations and footwork to make his experienced blond opponent look tired and confused by the end of the second round. The bell saved Jorgensen in the third after a left hook sent him to the canvas.

He came out gamely but wearily in the fourth and ran into a flurry of hooks and a short right to the chin that put him down for keeps at 1:32 of the fourth round. When attempts to revive him failed, he was rushed to the hospital. He was pronounced dead there a few minutes after arrival.

INQUEST IS ROUTINE

This was the first fatality in New York boxing rings in over two years. What action local authorities would take

(Continued on page 25, col. 1)

Baby looked up and saw Louie studying him over Ronnie's shoulder.

"I could feel it comin'," Baby said.

"It wasn't your fault," Ronnie said.

"Didn't look to me like he trained," Louie said.

"He could just about hold up his hands," Baby said.

"I couldn't figure what happened to him. He was tough last time."

"He was going downhill," Ronnie told him.

"Yeah," Baby said. "I sure helped him on his way, didn't I."

Georgie came around from behind the bar and answered the booth phone.

"Baby," he said, holding his hand over the mouth-piece, "it's for you."

"Who?"

He turned around to ask.

"Sport writer," Georgie said, showing his face again.

"Farnham or Farmer or somethin like that."

"Tell them I just left. I got nothin to say."

He could feel all their eyes as he headed for the door.

"Where you going?" Ronnie called.

Ronnie caught up with him on the street.

"I just want to get a little air," Baby said.

"I'll come along."

But when they got to the car, Baby hesitated. "I guess I better get this air by myself."

Ronnie looked lemon-coloured in the light of the neon Tavern sign. His long serious face looked worried.

Baby laughed, passing it off. "Take it easy," he said, hitting Ronnie's shoulder and opening the car door. "I see you tomorrow. The sun comes out we'll go out to Lynnedale and play a few holes.

Ronnie was still standing there when Baby drove off.

5

IN THAT MOMENT of dread and pity and purge that paralyses everybody at a fight—that awed moment of the knockout—she stood frozen in silence, removed from herself and from the crowd, her heart dead inside her, her breath coming in quick gasps. Then behind her somebody shouted, “Down in front! Set down!” and she let herself fall back into the seat, great tears streaming down her face.

The boy with glasses stared at her in amazement. “You all right?”

“I’m all right,” she murmured, looking neither at him nor at the ring but at the crumpled half of his programme on the floor at her feet.

Stumbling across a dozen knees, she got to the aisle and hurried toward the exit, not bothering to wipe her eyes, the spectre of that broken body back there sharp and terrible in her mind, a desperate and somehow final illusion shattered by all she’d seen here tonight.

For if it had been Baby beaten and fighting back and finally going down magnificently before a stronger man, she would have felt differently about it. But she saw that Baby *always* won; and what she once had thrilled in—his easy shimmering grace—she now felt loathing for. Wasn’t pity more important than power? Her whole life

revolted against him and what he stood for. He had been pitiless with her, just as he'd been pitiless with Jimmy Jorgensen a moment ago. She still detested the attitude of the crowd, which resented Baby's perfection in the very thing they'd come to see. But it seemed to her now that he lacked some quality that could make him a great and admirable person; and that perhaps it would have been impossible for him to be a fighter in the first place if he had that quality.

As she got into a cab and rode downtown, she could still see him standing there in the corner after the knock-down, his face shiny with sweat, his body smeared with Jorgensen's blood, his mouthguard distorting his face into something like a sneer. His eyes had been interested in one thing only: the completeness of Jorgensen's collapse. His arms bulged with the power to complete it if Jorgensen managed to stumble to his feet. She felt she had mistaken the look that was the mark of his face for faint irony and detachment, when it was really a look of savage contempt for everyone he came in contact with. "For money," she could hear him saying, "that's all I'm in it for." He wasn't only talking about boxing then. He was talking about life too, she thought, wanting now to destroy the whole concept she'd had of him, and feeling at the same moment a last belief in life itself disappearing with it.

At Twenty-third Street she saw a movie marquee and people straggling out under it. She'd been so involved in the fight, so overwhelmed by her reactions to it, that it seemed incredible there were millions of people in the city tonight who'd been doing other things all the while—people who'd never heard of Paris James or Jimmy

Jorgensen; or of her. Perhaps among them they represented all the possibilities of life—all the ways to escape from self and present (that movie house, for instance, or over there the Shamrock Bar); all the bitter victories and all the humiliating defeats. Perhaps among them they represented all that man could know anywhere, in any age. All that he could dream and experience and suffer.

It depressed her that this might be so. At a moment when she saw a whole lifetime of experience stretched out behind her like one vast failure, it depressed her to be reminded of the complicated jungle of experience that remained to be explored; that she would never explore; that she would be as lost and as hopeless in as she had been in the past. And it occurred to her now that through her entire life perhaps she'd only been fooling herself. She had always seen herself as someone eagerly in search of adventure; someone with an impulsive need to explore reality, to relate herself with the real world whatever the cost to herself. Even in high school when she'd taken her camera and a reluctant friend named Katie Collins and gone into New York on the train—to thrill the Bowery bums with her brashness while she took their picture; to rally the wolf whistles of all kinds of Village street-corner characters as she and Katie hurried along, bare-legged and aloof, toward still newer, still drabber photographic samplings—she had seen herself as someone breaking with her mother's sterile middle-class propriety and flinging herself into life—perhaps just as her father had done when she was ten, divorcing her mother and taking a job as a construction engineer in Brazil; dying there a dozen years later. And she had always thought of

her flight from college to New York as the same kind of adventurous search—along with her painting, her love affairs, her trip abroad, her passion for a negro boxer named Paris James.

But wasn't the opposite true? Wasn't even her flight from college a refusal to finish what she'd begun, in preference for the glamorous possibilities of a world and a career she'd really known very little about at the time?

It was true—she had always given up the “real,” the present, what existed, for any passing dream that would lead her away from it. Including her marriage—which she'd dismissed so casually once it was broken by the war. Including, perhaps, even her art. Had it actually been the spiritual anæsthesia of the war that made her throw over, at the very moment her work was taking on direction and her name was becoming known, the thing that had been the motive of her whole life? Or had she stopped painting for the same reason she seemed to quit everything else once it became part of her day-to-day existence and she could take it for granted?

She had given the driver the address of that mammoth Vandam Street loft Lillian Glidden had turned into an apartment—she'd had dinner there tonight; she was supposed to go back there now to a party—but as she paid the fare and got out of the cab, she knew she couldn't go to a party tonight. It's too late, she thought illogically, meaning not the hour of the night but the hour of her life. It's really too late to go anywhere, to see anything, to know anyone new. It's too late.

And watching the cab disappear up the street, she knew there was nothing to do except go home. I'll walk home,

she thought. I'll even put off getting *there* as long as possible. . . . A feeling of futility that was somehow delicious and desirable seemed to flood her whole body as she pushed ahead against the wind.

She stopped at a hamburger stand on Seventh Avenue, lingering over her coffee, suspended between the place she had been and the place she was going. When she went out on the street again, she noticed the great balloons of steam coming from the mouths of a couple walking along arm in arm in front of her. Balloons that ought to have words printed on them like comic-strip people's conversation, she thought with a single aching flash of humour.

She felt more desolate than ever, entering the dim icebox of the foyer. Was there anything lonelier than going to a prize-fight by yourself and coming home to an empty apartment? Yet it had been her own choice to do this. Dick had called three times since that night she'd run into him in Chinatown, and she'd always given him glib excuses for not seeing him. Not glib enough, it was true, to keep him from asking, "Are you and Baby James going steady these days?" Yet she knew that all she'd have had to do was ask him and he'd have taken her to the fight. Or even someone like Lillian or Hazel Towne might have gone with her. It had been her choice, she thought, climbing the final flight of stairs. It was all her own choice.

She must have left a light on—there was an edge of light under the door. Putting the key in the lock, she turned the knob both ways and pulled. It didn't open—and she doubted for a moment that it *was* her door. Yet there was that foolish brass-hand knocker she herself

had screwed on, and ~~this~~ *this* was the fourth floor. It was her door, all right. Somebody had bolted it from the inside.

Should she ring the bell and see who answered? Or maybe it would be a little smarter to go out to a drugstore and call herself on the phone—or go downstairs and get Sandra Cunningham to come back up with her while she rang the bell.

She was just turning away to see whether Sandra was home—when she heard footsteps; heard the bolt being worked; saw standing in the doorway a stout middle-aged woman with short gray hair—a familiar stranger.

“Mother! What are you doing here? How’d you get in?”

“Well, I must say you look awfully pleased to see me, Laine.”

“But it gave me such a scare. How’d you get in?”

“I got the janitor to let me in.”

She brushed that proud bosom as she went by into the room, feeling the same faint revulsion she could remember from any physical contact with her mother. The room was immaculate—magazines stacked neatly on an end table, the two highball glasses she’d been meaning to wash for the past couple of days gone from the mantel, no dust anywhere, and even her paintings, most of which had been leaning haphazardly over there in the corner, now standing neatly straight up and down, the smaller ones on the outside. Hadn’t she been descended upon, though. No time at all might have passed since she was fifteen and coming home every day to find her most personal possessions carefully scrutinized, conscientiously tidied up like this.

"I see you've made yourself at home," she said, tossing her raincoat on the couch.

"Well really, Laine, the place was such a mess I just couldn't resist——"

"I see you couldn't. But did you ever stop to think maybe I *like* it that way?"

"Nobody likes dirty glasses——"

"But I happen to like them! I happen to like dirty glasses standing around!"

And inspired by rage, she marched out to the kitchen, took two glasses from the cabinet, and brought them back and put them precisely where they had been on the mantel.

Her mother's plump, self-assured face, unwrinkled as the faces of people who never experience strong emotions sometimes are, only smiled understandingly. She seemed almost pleased that she'd brought on this tantrum—since then she had the chance to show the world her own proud complacency again.

"Do you mean," Laine said, calmer now, "that you came all the way in from Huntington to see me without even calling? How could you know I'd be home?"

Her mother sat down in the easy chair, her knees habitually close together in the way she'd learned thirty-five years ago at the second-best finishing school in St. Louis, Missouri. "I had some shopping to do and I thought I'd drop by. Does that strike you as strange? After all, Laine, you *haven't* been home since last Thanksgiving. And you haven't called me since—I don't know when. Was it Christmas Day?"

Laine looked around the room. She didn't see any packages.

"Your shopping trip doesn't seem to have been much of a success."

"I had some slipcover material sent out. And I wanted to get a hat but I couldn't find anything I liked."

"You couldn't?" She flopped, suddenly limp, in the corner of the couch. "And how's Huntington these days?"

"Well, it's pretty much the same, I suppose. I've been so busy redoing the living room——"

The phone cut her short. There was silence.

It rang again.

"Well, aren't you going to answer it?" her mother asked. A superior little smile passed across her face as she added: "It must be awfully important for them to be calling at this hour."

"It can't be very important," Laine said. But her hands were stiff with anticipation. It had already begun to ring a third time when she reached out and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Was that you I saw at the fight?" he asked.

Her mother's eyes were on her.

"Yes," Laine said, "that was me."

"I saw you goin up the aisle. I felt like yelling at you."

She didn't answer. She didn't feel she had the strength to.

"I thought maybe I'd come down and see you."

"No," she said, "I'd rather you wouldn't."

"You said call you after the fight. I figured we'd see each other."

"I can't. Not tonight or—any other night, for that matter." Her mother's alertness seemed to be sitting right here on her lap.

"I gotta see you," he said. "I'm feelin low. You probably don't know what happened."

"No, I don't."

"Jorgensen died after the fight."

She didn't know what to say, and said distractedly, "I'm very sorry," as if he'd complained of nothing more than a slight headache.

"My name is Paris," he countered. "Some people call me by it."

"I know—I really do know." But she didn't know how to go on, with her mother over there pretending to leaf through a magazine.

"And I'm comin' down. If somebody's there, get rid of them."

"Please don't. Call me tomorrow—but please don't come tonight."

She didn't know whether he'd agreed or not. She sat holding the dead phone, conscious that the blood had all drained from her face.

"Is something the matter?" her mother asked, closing the magazine.

"Something's a personal matter."

"Really? Well, in that case let's have some coffee. I made a pot."

It was while they were both out in the kitchen and Laine, lighting a burner, had her back turned, that she managed to say what she'd been wanting to say ever since she hung up.

"I suppose you're going back to Huntington tonight, aren't you?"

"Why, no, I hadn't planned to. Or rather, I *had* planned to, but I had to wait so long for you that the last train's

probably left by now. Let's see . . . I believe it left ten minutes ago. I'll just sleep on the couch."

Laine turned around, her hands on the stove behind her. "But I think a friend's coming down to see me," she said, keeping her voice as even as she could. "And I'd like to see him alone."

"Oh, a gentleman friend."

"Yes."

"You mean you don't want your mother to see the gentlemen friends who call on you?"

"No, I don't, Mother. He certainly doesn't want to come and talk to me and my mother—he wants to talk to me alone. So why don't I phone and see if I can get you a hotel room, and we'll have all morning tomorrow to talk."

Her mother was smiling. "You shock me, Laine. Really you do. The way you're trying to rush me out of here. It isn't that you're ashamed of *me*, is it?"

Her accenting the "me" instead of the "ashamed" made Laine gaze curiously at her. "Just what is all this, Mother?"

Her mother smiled understandingly, but did turn her eyes away. "Are *you* asking *me*? I think it should be the other way around."

"I've never in all my life heard so much double talk."

"But it isn't double talk, my dear. It's just that I'm a little shocked at your attitude." She brought out cups and saucers. "Now, some coffee. And then perhaps we'll discuss where I'm going to stay tonight—since you're going to be so busy."

They'd have to drink the coffee, she decided. She

couldn't turn her mother out on the streets at twelve-thirty on a muggy night in March without allowing her to drink a cup of coffee first, Paris James or no Paris James.

So they sat with their cups in the studio, Laine gulping hers to get it over with, her mother taking only the daintiest sips—and setting her cup and saucer down each time with a dainty tinkle.

"I see you've done some new paintings."

"Yes," Laine answered miserably. "I've been working a little—but not much."

"But do you really think anyone in the *world* would want to hang something like that on their wall?"

She knew without looking that her mother was motioning to Paris's portrait hanging unframed where her *Running People* had been.

"I don't *know* what anyone in the world would want to hang," she said. "I'm not really interested."

"But shouldn't you be? If you're going to be a professional—in whatever field you choose to enter—shouldn't you be——"

"Do you mind if we don't talk about my 'career' tonight, Mother?"

Her mother smiled sympathetically and sipped again.

"Did he pose for you?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The nigger."

Involuntarily she glanced at it. "No," she answered. "I did it all from memory."

They sat in silence then, for a little while. Until Laine said, "I'll call the Fifth Avenue and see if they have a room."

And she did, and reserved it while her mother sat across the room studying her.

"Did you bring a bag? I could lend you——"

"But, dear, I haven't finished my coffee yet."

There was the dainty sipping again, the dainty setting down of the cup.

And sudden as a saw at her nerves—the buzzer.

"That must be your friend."

She couldn't move—feeling that if she sat here for a few minutes without answering, maybe he'd go away.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

He *had* to go away. He couldn't come up here . . .

But the buzzer sounded again, and this time her mother got up and walked toward the answering button. "You can't just let him stand down there all night, Laine," she said reasonably. "And I'd like to see who your friends are these days."

6

THE THREE HARLEM apartments that Mrs. Lorry James had lived in since the war marked as well as anything else Baby's changing status as a fighter—from 1945, when he could get six hundred dollars as a Garden prelim fighter, through 1947, when he was a fifteen-hundred-dollar semi-finalist or even a main-eventer for a couple of grand, to now, when the pay could be half a dozen times that amount. For Baby supported his mother, and she moved as he won. In 1945 she had lived far uptown in Harlem, not in an entire apartment, but in a third of an apartment, one room, sublet as almost all the rooms of all the apartments in the building and the block were sublet. Not only Baby but both her daughters—Selma older than Baby, Analee younger—had lived with her then, in that one room with a kitchen and bathroom down the hall common to all three families. But now, when she had three times as much room, she had only Selma living with her, while Analee was staying at a girl friend's apartment, celebrating divorce number two, and Baby had a place of his own. •

She lived now in one of those huge, mammoth-entranced, marble-sided apartment houses that line Seventh Avenue in downtown Harlem, beginning where Central Park ends. Places built by and for white people

three or four decades' ago and relinquished like prizes of war as white Manhattan retreated, year by year, farther downtown, and Harlem expanded.

Baby's triumph as a fighter was an unexpected and unwelcome one to a woman devoted to quiet white middle-class ideals as few white women ever were. Back in Cincinnati where she was born and raised, her father, a chauffeur for an Avondale stockbroker, had considered his family a wide clean cut above the West End tenement niggers. But Lorry had taken a step down when she married at twenty a man who had a habit of drinking his odd jobs away. She had stuck it out in poverty for eight years, had thrown him out, taken him back, and thrown him out for good at last—to go to work herself as a cleaning woman and focus her longings for what her father had called “living respectable” on that restless, skinny, long-limbed son of hers, called Paris out of the whim of a pregnant woman's longing for some faraway and “cultural” place she would never see. But after she brought the whole brood to Harlem where her sister lived, she'd lost him to the streets, to Louie Jackson's gym, and to a money-spangled ideal that to him had an immediacy making her talk about “doctor” and “lawyer” and “politician” as farfetched as something in a fantastic movie at the Apollo.

He'd fought in secret at first, those bootleg kid fights of his when he'd hit the road with Louie Jackson and half a dozen other fifteen-sixteen-seventeen-year-olds. Then he'd fought to her knowledge; but she hadn't gone to see him. Never, not the first time she'd known he was fighting and not tonight. For the last year, however, she'd been watching his fights on the television set he'd

bought her for Christmas. And had often wondered, sitting in front of her twenty-inch screen with a few of her neighbours around her, why people were willing to pay so much—hundreds of thousands of dollars, the way she heard it—to see something they could see for free on any Harlem streetcorner any night of the week. Yet because she found it necessary to take pride in something, she'd ended up by being proud of Baby—of his name in the paper, the way people pointed out his red car wherever he parked it, the vast importance the world seemed to give to excellence in something she'd learned from childhood to be mightily ashamed of. It was his mother's reluctant pride that helped stamp Baby's face with that deceptive, half-amused look it often wore—as if he was aware of his own strength and agility and found them slightly contemptible.

It was after midnight when he got to her flat that night. She'd had some friends in, but the last one was saying goodbye in the doorway when Baby got off the elevator—a short fat woman built like a snowman.

"You was wonderful—just absolutely wonderful," she said to Baby. "We just yelled when you knocked him down. Didn't we yell, Lorry?"

"I just wring my hands," his mother said to him, "the way I always do. Come inside, you must be dead-tired, honey."

The neighbour lady hesitated, itching to stay now that Paris was home. But Lorry said goodnight, said yes they would meet at church next Sunday morning, said goodnight again, and closed the door firmly. Paris was lolling on the couch, one leg thrown over the arm. His hat was where he'd tossed it—in the middle of the round dining-

room table that was the only piece of furniture Lorry James had left from her cleaning-woman days.

"She came over and looked long at him, hands where her hips should have been, head shoved forward a little as it was whenever she looked at anyone or anything she loved.

"You hungry?" she asked. "You look beat as an old rug."

"I already had somethin to eat," Paris said, bending his head far back and pressing it against the top of the couch. "I *feel* pretty beat."

"You got a cut, honey." She touched the tape at the corner of his eye. "How's your hands?"

He hadn't taken off the pigskin gloves. He looked at them. "Hands are okay."

"Well, take off your coat and those gloves and stay awhile. There's some coffee left—I think. Otherwise I'll make some."

"Make it tea," Baby said. He took off his coat, dropped his gloves in the hat. "Where's Selma?"

But she didn't answer the question; just went on staring. "What you keep lookin up at the ceiling like that for? Come on back down to earth with the rest of us mortals . . . Selma went to see you tonight. Then she was going over to a little party. She'll be home soon—I'm expecting her any minute."

"What's this party?"

"Lulie Frazier's—she's been here, you met her. And a couple other girls."

"She ought to give up that Lulie Frazier," Baby said. "She never will get married that way. That Lulie Frazier'd scare any man off."

"You don't expect me to tell her," his mother said. "I can't tell her or you or Lee *nothing*; you three know it all. . . . Didn't you see them at the fight?"

"Saw Lee," Baby said, following her out into the kitchen, noticing, because the rose-coloured company dress she wore had worked up on her big barrel-shaped body, that she was still rolling her stockings. "She waved." He didn't bother to mention that he'd also seen Lee at the Tavern pouring them down.

"The fight I saw," she said, bustling around at the stove boiling water for the tea, "you *won* tonight, but I never saw you look so hang-dog before. You never ~~act~~ like this when you *won*." She turned around and looked square at him without batting an eye. And said nothing, the way she could wait you out for ten hours or ten years if she had to.

But he was silent. Trying to make up his mind to tell her, he couldn't, he couldn't release it. It was not so much caring about Jorgensen that trapped it, but caring about her and himself in her eyes. Because as long as nothing like this happened, then she could never be completely right in the way she felt about fighting. But now it had happened, and she would think she was completely right, and he could neither face her being completely right nor face the way she would look when she found out she was completely right—not victorious but beat, like he was beat.

He was glad when he heard the front door ~~open~~ and Selma saying, "Anybody home? I see a certain hat."

He saw she had a paper, but when she put it on the kitchen table he saw it was an early edition. And he saw by the way she acted—coming over and hugging him

tight, kissing him on the cheek and saying, "It was just out of this world, the way you looked up there tonight"—that she hadn't heard a thing,

"And what will your order be?" his mother said. "Tea? Coffee? What's that on your cheek there?"

Selma felt and looked. "Soot, I guess. Lulie was having trouble with her stove again and I tried to get it started." She laughed suddenly, a regular chortle of a laugh. "You was just the creamiest thing in that ring tonight," she said. "If you didn't hear me hollering for you, you sure must be deaf."

"I couldn't see you," Baby said. "I saw Lee—where were you?"

"Right in back of her. I was makin enough noise and waving."

"Well, we were pretty worked up here too," his mother admitted. "Since you're too busy to answer my question, I'll just put you a cup out and you can take what you want."

She disappeared into the pantry and came back carrying the prize for the evening. "I baked this specially for you, it's still warm. You get a whole quarter—that's for winning." And she cut a quarter out of the big thick juicy apple pie and with the flat of the knife removed it to a plate, scooping out the apples and brown juice left behind and putting those on the plate too. "Course, you don't have to worry, cause if you lost, honey, I'd give you the whole thing."

"I'll never eat this between now and tomorrow this time," Baby said. "You're trying to make me too fat to fight."

"That's just what I *am* tryin to do," she told him, and

held her look for twenty seconds before getting out the cups.

"What you did to that old Jorgensen!" Selma said, still laughing, so that Baby thought Lulie Frazier must have given her a couple of drinks. "I bet he still ain't woke up."

Baby studied the pie and took a bite. He heard his mother say, "Let's not talk any more about fight, I had enough fight for one night. Let's just celebrate the winner and that we're all in one piece and good health and God help us."

He bounced his tea ball, not saying anything, not looking at them. But Selma—two years older, already getting heavy like his mother, not married and not going to get married because his mother didn't push her and she didn't care and nobody was especially after her the way they'd been after Lee ever since she was old enough to wear a brassière—felt like fun and conversation. She said, "Well, I never saw such a long face in my life before; what's the matter? Here, I'll show you something that'll cheer you up—anyhow, cheer *me* up." She was poking around in her green leather bag. "Lulie's brother, you know him, Sammy, well he brought it back from Europe with him, Italy or someplace, when he was in the Army."

"What is it?" Baby said, setting down his cup. "Bottle stopper made like a man's head?"

"Now watch." She pressed something in ~~back~~ with her thumb and the grinning man's hat raised up and a woman's head, also painted in bright reds and yellows, also grinning to beat the band, peeked out. "Ain't that the craziest thing you ever seen?" Selma laughed.

"When I saw it I just told Lulie I got to have it, so she give it to me." She released her thumb, letting the man's hat, with his woman under it, descend into his round wooden head again. Then pressed the lever—the woman jumped out grinning. "Does that mean a man's always got a woman on his mind?" Selma laughed.

Baby said, "Lemme see it," and took it and pressed the lever and the hat jumped up. "Pretty neat," he said, trying to grin and make a grimace. "All we need now is a bottle to put under it."

"Don't worry about the bottle," his mother said. "We get along all right without any bottle."

He didn't know why what she said depressed him. But it depressed him so much he had to keep looking at the stopper, pressing the lever, making the woman's head pop out.

"Don't tell me *you're* gonna take it away from *me*," Selma said, thinking he was lost in fascination for it. "I just talked somebody out of it myself."

But he couldn't be talked out of his mood. He put the stopper on the table, knowing he had to get out of here or he'd be sharp with them when he didn't want to.

"I'll stop by tomorrow," he said, getting up. "It's way after twelve and I gotta be going."

"Wouldn't be you got something in your head like my little man's got in his," Selma said.

There weren't any smiles left in him. His sureness, which held all his other qualities together, was sagging. He was like some sagging punching bag that needs a shot of air.

"Here I got your bed all made," his mother was saying.

"You're wore to a nerve's end. I don't want you go chasin around tonight."

"I'm not goin chasin around," he told her. "I'll sleep up at my own place."

And tightening the gloves on his hands in the self-help elevator, he didn't wonder whether this was the thing to do or not; nor whether she would still want to hear from him after all these weeks. He only worried and wondered whether she would be home at all—he was still *that* sure of himself, or at least of himself with her. He felt, tonight for the first time, touched and drawn by that wild, crazy enthusiasm of hers, and he couldn't imagine that *she* could change. He couldn't imagine that she could be that ungenerous, to change when he needed her, however hard a time he might have given her.

So that, boxed in the folding-door phone booth of the Savannah Chili Parlour a block up the street, he was surprised at the coolness in her voice, he was offended—as if in calling her he had done one of the few completely innocent acts of his life and been rebuffed. And reacted the way he did to a fighter he'd expected to be a pushover and found to be tough. He would have gone down there if he'd thought a dozen other men, all white, were sitting around her place.

But not if he'd known he was going to find what he did find after parking the car and pushing her buzzer and listening and pushing again and climbing the three flights of stairs. Waiting there in the silent *hall*, he felt the daring of what he was doing here. Because she was white and he was unwelcome, he felt it was beyond any daring he'd show in the ring tonight. He felt his nerves burning their last energy.

7

NOBODY SPOKE. Not the grayhaired woman who opened the door and not Laine looking over the grayhaired woman's shoulder and not him. Prepared for a man, he didn't know what to say to a woman. And it looked like the woman didn't know what to say to him.

Her eyes moved to his hat, then to the piece of adhesive over his eye, then to his collar. It was the first time he'd ever felt the absence of a tie. He thought she was going to close the door without even speaking, when she opened her mouth.

"Whom," she said with some kind of southern accent, "are you looking for?"

"This is a friend of mine, Mother." Laine spoke up. "Won't you come in, Paris?"

But Mrs. whoever-she-was didn't move aside to let him in. She was planted in the doorway like somebody turned to stone. Speechless. With a little twist to her mouth that didn't look like a smile.

"Come on in, Paris," Laine said again.

He made the effort. He had to brush the grayhaired woman to get by, taking off his hat and mumbling a how-you-do-but getting no answer.

Then she found her voice, and turned. "I think I'd

better be going, Laine." He was looking at her, but she didn't look at him.

"I'll call a cab for you," Laine said.

"No, that won't be necessary." He noticed she held her chin in the air the way Laine sometimes did. "I'll find one all right."

"Then I'll walk——"

"No thank you, dear. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

She moved to the closet and got her coat and hat, then moved to the mirror to see how the hat went on. Then she did something peculiar. As she was picking up her pocketbook from the end table, she noticed a couple of cigarette butts in the ashtray. She carried the ashtray over to the fireplace, tossed out the butts, and put the ashtray back on the table. With a superior smile as if she'd won some kind of bet with herself, she opened the door and hesitated there a minute to say, "Call me, dear. If you have time."

He did it because he felt like doing it: he tossed his hat casually on a chair at that moment. She didn't look at him or say a word to him. She studied his hat for about four and a half seconds, then closed the door behind her.

He tossed his gloves into the hat and unbuttoned his coat—like a man who had all the rights of a resident without having to bother to move in. He could see now okay why she'd acted that funny way on the phone, talking double talk and putting him off. She was scared her old lady was going to see what she'd been running after.

"I wish you'd go too, Paris," she said. "I'm very tired tonight."

"Tired?" he said. "You sure that's the only reason you didn't want me down here?"

"I'm even too tired to talk about it."

"Only I'm not. I guess that's the chance you take when you get to know people like me. Sometimes they show up unexpected, like you used to call *me* up unexpected."

She didn't answer. She just dropped into the corner of the couch and sat looking at him with those wide blue eyes—like she was seeing right through him; like nothing he said made any difference to her anymore.

"I didn't come for anything but just to see you, if that's what's eating you," he told those eyes. "I figured maybe we knew each other good enough so I could come down here when I felt low—like I used to come when you felt like seeing *me*. Breaking training," he added, feeling that the stare those eyes were giving him was in itself a kind of injustice; that the mere fact she remained inert like that on the couch instead of coming up close was unfair after all he'd gone through. "It was a pretty long drive all the way over from Jersey that time."

"It seemed like a long drive to me, too," she said. "Waiting to see you."

"Well, here I am." He was still standing. "No waiting."

"And here I am," Laine said. "Not in love anymore."

Saying it so casual, that's what got him. Like somebody could say, "I use to go for red ties, now I go for blue"—just like that, no explanations. What was that fancy stuff of hers about "love" and "vision of courage in the face of death"? He guessed it was for laughs—only he didn't play for laughs. He played for keeps.

Clenching the right with which he had chopped one face down tonight, he walked through that face to her and sat down close beside her.

"I play for keeps," he said, saying it to her and to Jorgensen, too. "In everything. Man gets in the ring with me, he knows he's goin all the way and take all I got. That's the way I am in everything."

He didn't know whether he expected an answer, anyhow he didn't get one. Just the big eyes looking on through him, the mouth with that heavy underlip that had always seemed determined before but that now seemed soft and relaxed, irritating him.

He moved his arm along the back of the couch to grasp her upper arm and make sure she was real, not a staring doll. She didn't move. Didn't move closer to him, didn't move away. Didn't react to his touch at all.

"You feelin sick?" he asked.

Which made her, of all things, smile. A little smile that hardly broke the cheeks. And turn her face from him in that chin-held-up way of hers.

"Yes, Paris, I'm feeling a little sick. Sick of life—if that's being sick."

"That includes me, I guess."

"It not only includes you," she said, her voice hollow and her eyes now turned just as determinedly away from him as they had been toward him. "It *became* you, for a while. I only lived—these past couple of months—through knowing you. Strange, isn't it? For a while you *were* life for me."

"'For a while,' " he mocked her. "Sounds like it's all over."

She picked up her burnt-out cigarette, stared at it, then

crushed it. "Yes," she said. "It's really all over, Paris—and I think you ought to go. Will you?"

She stood up as abruptly as she'd sat down—standing there in front of him looking down at him.

"Will you?"

Like he wasn't in her book at all and never could be.

"Please."

The white gleam of his good teeth showed in his grin.

"Yeah," Paris "Baby" James, leading contender for the middleweight championship of the world, said, "I'll go."

"I'll go," he added, off the couch and holding her by both shoulders so quickly she didn't have a chance to step back. "When I get good and ready I'll go."

"Please leave me alone." The ear she showed him was pink and clean; he'd never noticed her ears before—any white person's ears. "I'm very tired. I'd like to go to bed."

"I'm tired too," he said above the commotion commencing in his chest. "I'll go to bed *with* you."

Which made her smile, and that was what really irritated him, that smile. Adding like she did: "It's too late, Paris. It's too late now for me."

"But it's not too late for me." The commotion growing and he let it ride him, let it tighten his hands and move in closer to her—to feel her hipbone probe his groin as she tried to turn away, like a weapon and a challenge both at once. Then it occurred to him: "You mean cause I killed somebody tonight—now I'm not in your book anymore. Is that it?"

"Don't be silly."

"All right then, you talk."

"I'm tired, can't you understand?" I want to go to bed."

"Come on, *we'll* go to bed." His arm around her, he moved her a couple of feet toward the bedroom, but she stopped him by standing flatfooted.

"Please."

"I'm not allowed to need you, then, is that the story? You can need me and I come running, but not the other way around. Check?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "I'll meet you somewhere tomorrow—but please go now, Please?"

Her "please" rang back through his mind like some polite word she was only using to put distance between them. Like a word some white woman used to a nigger kid she was afraid would throw a rock through her window if she didn't take it easy. It infuriated him. It left him alone here even now with her—and she had no right to do that. She of all people. No matter how much he'd resented her calling him up at first—he always came, didn't he? And now the night he really needed what she gave him—she'd changed her mind. How bout that? Changed her mind.

Changed *her* mind, okay—not his.

He couldn't tell if she tried to resist or not, because nobody could resist that trick he'd learned as a kid—bending somebody's legs at the knee by grabbing them around the shoulders with one arm and shoving them back against his own thrust-out leg, neatly carrying them backward to the ground. Only in this case she fell on the round white string rug beneath him, helpless. When he stood up breathing a little hard, she continued to lie there the way she had been all the time, with her face turned away from him but her eyes wide open, saying

nothing, resisting not at all, limp and defeating him with her limpness as she could not have defeated him by resisting to the end. Defeating him by seeing not him but—what? What was she seeing over there across the room, acting like what he'd just done hadn't happened? A ghost? A chair? Or was she even conscious?

He picked her up, an inspiration to counter the dreary defeat trickling down inside him, and carried her, still limp, into the bedroom. Where he laid her on the bed and pulled the striped spread and the blue blanket and the sheet back, out from under her, and studied her a minute thinking whether to undress her, deciding not to, smoothing out her skirt, drawing the sheet up to her chin.

And still—still she didn't move, or say a word, or recognize his existence with a look.

"You all right?" he asked.

It was about as adequate as seeing somebody pinned under a car and going up to them and saying, "Can I get you something?"

But she did answer—like the person pinned under the car might have answered. He leaned closer. "What?"

He heard it when she repeated it.

Heard it and went—remembering to take along his hat and gloves; remembering to button and belt his coat on the way down the stairs.

Stepping into a stinging rain that had begun since he'd been inside, he stepped into an even larger sense of loss and doubt that the emptiness that had brought him down here. "Please go," that was what she'd whispered last, and for all he knew she was still lying just as he'd left her, staring at nothing across the room, the sheet still covering the body she'd let him have like it was no part of her at

all. Driving across Sheridan Square, where most of the nightclub neon was dead and the newspaper stand was closed and only a Cube Steak catered to the all-night coffee-and trade, he wished to hell he'd left the hat behind him; then he could have thought it was the hat.

But it wasn't the hat he'd left back there. You could go back and get the hat.

It wasn't the hat, it was something that had belonged to her.

Which she had almost succeeded in giving him and which she herself had lost, and by losing had taken the promise of away from him.

Something was dead. Somebody gone. Her love—and with her love the special way she saw him? Or the special way she saw him—and with that her love? Either case, her love—and the special way. Not his mother's love—the “natural” kind. Or somebody like Clarice's—that easy kind that came with one of George's vodka collins. But the crazy throw-yourself-away kind that she had shown for him and he had treated so nice and casual while it lasted. But remembered like a missing arm now it was dead.

For one moment, while the tyres complained luxuriously against the oily street rolling him fast back to his old life, he had a funny kind of double vision that was gone almost before it came: Her there on the round white string rug. And Jorgensen there on the square white canvas.

And him standing over both of them—at once.

It couldn't be, but in a flash he saw it, it was real. It was like an accusation. Like what had really happened. Like an answer to his doubts so tricky, so impossible, as to leave him farther, farther, farther (the car rolling

northward through the swallowing city) from any answer at all.

Had he killed both of them, was that it? Killed them with the same good quick combo at the moment he knew they were both vulnerable and had already lost anyway? Killed them to show his strength when his strength had already been shown—proved—admitted by both?

But *she* was still alive, he thought. He was the one who was dead in her mind. And he was the one, too, who'd liked her love even while brushing it off. And used it to the last to feel his own power—using it as permission to do what he'd done to her tonight.

It was love, then—her love—that had given him his “excuse”—to beat Jorgensen the way he'd beaten him; to rape her the way he'd raped her. Love—and the special way of seeing himself that her love had brought with it. He couldn't have killed Jorgensen just for the money, for the championship shot, could he? He couldn't live with that excuse. The only excuse he could live with was the special way she'd seen him and the special thing she'd made of him—some kind of hero fighting the odds for his life; fighting not something human but something big and bad.

What did he want, then? To be loved? To get what love could give him? But you couldn't just ask “to be loved.” He had asked for it tonight, had driven down there to claim what was his, and it wasn't there; he couldn't take it by however much force. Then what did you do when you wanted to be loved and the love was gone?

The red-and-green neon that twisted into knots of thick glass vines to form the words *Fancy Fish Tavern* above the entrance was already out; it couldn't tell him.

But as he drove slowly by, he saw people still inside in the half-dark the way regulars always hung around a good long easy while after legal closing hours. He pulled up and got out.

She said, "And here I just been waitin here eatin my heart out," when he came through the door. Though there was somebody with her, a tall mahogany bim maybe forty-five with a moustache, whom Baby had never seen before. He'd been buying the drinks, but when Baby told her, "Come on, I got somethin to show you outside," the tall guy offered no resistance at all. He let her go with a nod, let her get helped into her gray squirrel jacket, accepting like a true gentleman the gorgeous smile she gave him for his expectations.

"And just what's this mysterious important thing you got to show me?" she asked with that flashy-eyed impudence that was her favourite come-on. She didn't seem to notice the rain. "I can just imagine."

"We'll go over to my place."

"Oh, *your* place tonight." Clarice laughed, but she was up close to him in the car when he started it. "This must be some special big occasion. You never did take me to *your* place before, did you? I feel real flattered."

He said "Good deal," for no good reason, not even able to look at her.

"Must be Christmas and I didn't know it," Clarice said.

Not even able to touch her.

Thinking when it was gone, then, what were you supposed to do? This? Take this one to your own place where you'd never taken her before because you didn't want her to get a foot into your personal life—taking

her to hotels instead where it was all clean and commercial and noncommittal? . . . When you'd never so much as invited the other one, lying there probably even now with those eyes, to come over where you lived, to look at what you were, to put a foot in that personal life you guarded so good?

"What do you do for a livin, Clary?" Baby asked suddenly, cruelly, not caring what he said, not caring what she answered.

But Clarice had all the answers. "I got a rich uncle," she said. And laughed real loud, just like it really was Christmas. And ran her hand up his leg, all the way, sure of her tall tan self and her casual past and her Christmas present.

8

ANYBODY WHO KNEW what went on in boxing knew where the real contracts were signed. They were signed in the office of the International Boxing Club above Madison Square Garden in New York, with nobody present except the fighters, Mr. Paris James and Mr. Anthony Aldi; the fighters' managers, Mr. Louis Jackson and Mr. Abraham Stein; and the man who controlled boxing in America, Mr. James Dugan Norris, I.B.C. president, and his assistant, Mr. Harry Markson.

That was the real signing, and neither national and state athletic officials, who were supposed to be responsible for such contracts, nor the sports writers, who had to be content with a rumour or two, were around that afternoon.

After everything was signed and sealed, of course, there was also the little matter of the Press, the public and the law to be taken care of. In this case the law was the Illinois State Athletic Commission because Norris liked Chicago for the fight. So one early April day the two fighters and their managers flew out to Chicago for a dummy signing, the formal public one, in the office of the state commission, which liked to think—publicly—that it was weighing and worrying over every comma and clause in a contract that had long since been made

and that would be binding whatever objections Illinois chose to make. There were, after all, forty-seven other states in the Union who wanted the business.

Norris liked Chicago for the fight because (1) he owned the Chicago Stadium, so why pay rent somewhere else? and (2) Chicago hadn't had a championship match in over a year and was money-ready for one—especially one involving a brave, burrowing, theatrically ferocious champion like Aldi, who pleased something in the Midwest sporting character, with the fluid-drive magician who'd been rated above him by the know-it-all eastern sports writers for over a year now, and whom he had been so carefully avoiding. Aldi's manager, Abe Stein, an obnoxiously loud little man with a battery hearing aid, had argued so long and successfully over the forty-two-per cent gate-cut he wanted that he hadn't wasted much time trying to convince Norris about Detroit—which was the city where Aldi had never lost a fight, had never failed to draw a crowd, and had been born. Chicago was almost as good anyhow, for Stein. And as for Baby and Louie, they took what they could get. They took the fight. Norris could have said the fight had to be held in Venezuela and they would have taken it. Norris could have told them their cut of the gate had to be twelve per cent, not the thirty they wanted and the eighteen they got, and they would have taken it. With an argument, of course, which was the way Louie had finally taken the eighteen. But you couldn't get particular when the man who controlled big-city, big-time boxing and the man who acted like he intended going to his grave calling himself middleweight champion finally heard the jingle of all that capacity-crowd cash and gave you the main chance.

Baby, more sullen these days than Louie had ever seen him, said "Take it"; Louie had taken it; both had signed privately in New York; and now here, in this Associated Press photo from Chicago that Harvey Bieberman, the boxing editor, tossed on Dick Willis' typewriter one afternoon in the paper's office in Manhattan, Baby was signing again—publicly—where it said his name.

Sportshirted, tieless, and unsmiling, he sat at a desk dotting the *i* in *Paris* with the men of the hour around him—Tony Aldi, wooden-faced and five miles wide in a two-toned jacket, sitting on his left gazing studiously at the contract; the Illinois commissioner, an elderly man who looked like he'd eaten and drunk well all his life, standing importantly between them with a hand on each fighter's shoulder; Jim Norris, also standing, wearing the smile of a fat cat who knows where more canaries are; and the managers at either side of the photograph—Louie for some reason looking away from the whole ceremony; little Abe Stein looking squarely into the camera, his coat unbuttoned to show an aggressive tie.

"What kind of tie is that Stein's got on?" Dick asked Bieberman, picking up the picture. "The one with the artist's models?"

"That's probably the one with the hundred-dollar bills," Bieberman said. "Everybody in the picture looks like he's gonna get rich—especially Stein."

"And Norris," Dick said. "What's the percentage split?"

"Forty-two — eighteen. That explains why Louie Jackson's looking the other way."

"Louie Jackson oughta be glad Aldi and the I.B.C. ran out of opponents and had to make a living—even if

he *loses* the championship. What do you think, 3-1—Baby?"

"I don't know," Bieberman said. "It's gonna be a fight." He was trying to draw smoke out of his dead cigar. "We've been panning Aldi for laying low, but he's a rough customer when it comes to fight."

"He can hit like a heavyweight."

"And he's never even been knocked down. I think he's even a pretty good boxer for his own purposes. He gets hit but he has to get hit to get inside where he likes to fight, and you notice it's never anywhere vital. He rolls them off the top of his head and his shoulders."

"He'll be like an armoured tank against a jet fighter," Dick said. "Incidentally, I meant to tell you—I picked up a little off-the-record story you could use in the column Saturday. Seems James gave his whole take from the Jorgensen fight to Jorgensen's widow. Something like nine thousand dollars' worth of conscience money."

"I didn't know he had a conscience. Where'd you get it?"

"No names attached," Dick said. "But it's straight."

"So what's all the secrecy?"

"I don't know—James just doesn't want it publicized, that's all. And the party who told me" (it was Louie Jackson, looking for good publicity for his fighter, who'd told him) "doesn't want his name attached as the bean spiller. But it's straight, you can use it."

Bieberman shoved his hat back on his well-oiled hair to the point he'd learned through the years was just this side of falling off, and studied his chewed cigar before dropping it reluctantly into the wastebasket. He was annoyed by Dick's silence about the source of his secret;

his fluttering adam's apple showed *it*. He sounded like what he was, an editor talking to an assistant, when he asked: "What are you working on?"

"The N.Y.U. game." Dick typed a period at the end of his sentence.

"Our golden boy got back in town this morning. Why don't you go and get us a story out of him?"

"Training stuff?"

"He'll give you an angle. He *used* to talk enough, anyhow—I don't know about this new secrecy of his."

"I'll track him down," Dick said.

But luck was against him. When he called Baby's apartment, nobody answered. And when he called Louie Jackson's office, Louie said, "He's not here. We don't start our honeymoon for a couple of weeks. Anyhow he told me no interviews, he don't want to see anybody for the press." He thought that over a minute. "He might be home," he offered on second thought. "He's not? Well, try downstairs at the Tavern, then. He drops in there in the afternoon lot of times."

Dick didn't call the Tavern. He buttoned his collar, shoved his tie-knot into place, put on his suitcoat and his topcoat and his hat, and took a subway up to 125th Street. He figured if he didn't catch Baby at the Tavern he might at least catch somebody there who could tell him where Baby was.

But he was still out of luck. Outside there were plenty of people standing and leaning around and inside ~~there~~ were plenty of people standing and sitting around, but none of them was Baby and none of them was Ronnie or any of the people he could remember from Baby's crew of sidekicks and stablemates and rubbers.

"He ain't been around here," Georgie said. "You knew he signed for the championship, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Dick said. "But he got back in town this morning. I thought maybe he dropped in here."

"Not here. He *usually* comes in here in the afternoon, but you never can tell. He comes and goes like he feels like." With that cheerful, rambling, sociable vagueness that Dick had noticed marked a lot of Harlem conversation, especially when a white man was asking the questions, Georgie turned to a baldheaded brown man five feet down the bar and said: "You ain't seen him pop in and out of here while I had my back turn, did you?"

The baldheaded man hadn't once looked their way, but he had a running knowledge of their conversation even so. He said: "He ain't been here these last couple hours. Might have been here before then—I wasn't here."

Dick put another half dollar on the bar for another bottle of beer and asked, "What's his mother's phone number, d'you know?"

Georgie rolled his bug eyes up till the whites showed, pouted his lips, and shook his head. He didn't know—not for publication, anyhow.

So leaving half the beer, Dick went out on the street and into the doorway nextdoor. He climbed one flight of stairs, passed a door that said: DAVID K. BUOY REAL ESTATE, *We Rent, We Buy, We Sell, Houses, Apartments, Commercial Properties, Walk In*, to the door that said: LOUIS JACKSON LICENSED BOXERS' REPRESENTATIVE, *Gym and Training Facilities*, and tried the knob and knocked but Loxie had already left. He was stuck. He went back down to the street, thinking the hell with it, keeping his eye

out for a cab, deciding, I'll ride back downtown in style, anyhow—when it hit him:

Would *she* know?

A flush that was a little like jealousy and a little like racial prejudice and a little like remembering being turned down by a girl and bested by another man spread up through his chest and neck and head. He identified these emotions, wanted nothing to do with any of them, and defied them all by looking around for a phone. So he *had* been pretty persistent—okay. Let her think what she wanted to about his reason for calling her again at this late date. Let her think from now to November that he was still trying to slip into that double bed of hers. He knew his real reason: he was a newspaperman who needed some information that maybe she could give him; he had no ulterior motives; he could take no for an answer and he had taken it—a full two months ago.

But the shock of seeing her in that Chink joint with James still echoed in his mind. As he dialled her number in a drug-store, he wondered: Had he really scored with her? Christ, he himself had introduced them. The way he'd felt about her at the time, he'd have strapped her in a rocket ship and introduced her to the man in the moon if that was what she wanted.

At the time? he thought, hearing the ring signal in his ear. Why only at the time? Why not right now?

He knew what it was. It was something he'd always wanted to be and wasn't—a real writer, his own man at the typewriter turning out stuff that had nothing to do with Bieberman's quickie inspirations or the paper's zombie-readership requirements—that made her, a girl who did do what she wanted, who had never peddled her talents on

any terms except his own, immensely attractive to him. On a sexual level, yes; but he could satisfy his sexual level without her. On another level, more importantly—a level that was haloed by an old teenage urge he'd never given in to, or, to tell the truth, had never actually believed he was good enough to succeed in if he did give in to. While she had given in to it the only straight way you could: without consideration for future success or non-success as far as money or fame were concerned; with consideration only for the thing itself and its importance to you.

Not that he'd ever thought of marrying her. He liked his life the way it was: his apartment, his freedom, his job. But she attracted him, and right now, as he listened to the phone's fifth ring, he suspected that even if he *was* just calling her for some information about where James might be (might be living with her, for all he knew), the fact that he'd thought of calling her in the first place had come from something else—from that old urge of his toward her.

Her hello caught him with an emotional note in his voice as he asked how she'd been. She'd been all right.

"Reason I called," he said with a studied matter-of-factness that betrayed the man who'd been turned down and didn't want to show it, "I've been hunting all over Harlem for Baby James and I haven't been able to locate him. I wondered if you knew where he was this afternoon."

"No, I don't," Laine answered. How many feet was she from the phone? "I haven't seen him—in several weeks, I guess it's been."

"But you were seeing quite a lot of him before that, weren't you?"

He shouldn't have said it. It sounded jealous.

"Yes, I was," she answered with an odd kind of disinterest.

And then there was silence, and then she added like a second thought: "I was in love with him."

"Was?" He was trying to keep it light. "You mean it's all over and there's a chance for me again?"

"It's all over," she said.

"Well then, what about the weekend?"

"What weekend?"

"You sound so far away from the phone," he told her, "I can hardly hear you. The thing is, I've got an invitation for two for Connecticut this coming weekend. Real nice people—you'll like them."

When she didn't say anything he added, "We could go up Saturday morning or Saturday afternoon and come back Sunday. You know Paul Sullivan's stuff, he does the cartoon for the sports page. Signs himself PS with a circle around it."

"Yes, I've seen it."

"Well, he's got a wife and a baby and a house in Rowayton. Boat too, he tells me. How about it?"

"All right," Laine said. "Any time you say."

He noted the listlessness in her voice but he didn't question it. He'd never gotten her off on a weekend before. He sensed that something was different now with her, and that something was going to be different now in their relationship.

He told her he'd check with Paul about the time and call her back, told her the way it looked Baby James must have gone into hiding for the day, told her to be good till she heard from him, and hung up—a shrewd

second sense of anticipation making him feel pleased with everything.

And he really knew it was his day when he walked out of the drugstore and there, turning the corner right in front of him, was an unmistakable red-riot Cadillac with Baby at the wheel and that pokerfaced, yellow-skinned buddy of his, Ronnie, at his elbow. Close on its tail, cruising like a gift from the gods who look after sports writers, was a cab. Dick hailed it and got in.

"Just follow that red Cadillac."

He expected it to stop anywhere but where it did—just this side of a Loew's theatre on West 116th Street, smack under a sign that said: ONE HOUR PARKING.

Well, what do you know? Dick thought, slamming the cab door, waiving the change. They're going to a movie. Could work this into the story—the insignificant thing a fighter does the day he gets back from making the deal he's been working all his life for.

"Baby!"

Baby didn't even look around. It was Ronnie who looked around and stopped Baby before they got to the ticket window.

But the leading contender did deign to wrinkle his forehead in recognition when Dick caught up with them. "How you doin'?" he said, shaking hands.

"I guess the last time we had a chance to talk was in the Fancy Fish after the Chavez fight. Remember?"

Something that was not exactly a change in Baby's expression but maybe just a clouding behind those concentrated eyes took place then. He said, "Yeah, I remember."

"I had an admirer of yours with me that time," Dick

said. He was studying the face, trying to make the face tell him what he wanted to know about Laine and trying too, to see whether this personal wedge was going to get him what he wanted. "I've been trying to get in touch with you. Wondered whether you'd have a little time to talk with me this afternoon."

"We're going to the movie," Baby said. "Some other time."

"It'd only take twenty minutes or so—if we could sit down somewhere."

"Why don't I see when the feature goes on?" Ronnie said to Baby. "Maybe we'd be getting in on the tail and anyhow." He came back from the ticket window with the news: "It's on now. It goes on again at ten minutes to six."

"Okay," Baby said, and while they sat at a table in the rear of a bar across the street with three bottles of beer and Dick's open notebook in front of them and a couple of Puerto Ricans at the bar glancing back curiously at Baby now and then, Dick asked him all the obvious questions he could think of plus a few that he prided himself were not so obvious.

Did he plan to train especially hard for Aldi or did he think it would be a pretty easy fight for him?

"Aldi's no easy touch," Baby said. "But I train the same for all of them. I train."

Where would he work out—the Half 'n Half?

"Yeah. I'll probably go over week after next."

Let's see, that'd give him about six weeks of training, wouldn't it. Did he have any special strategy worked out for Aldi—or was it too early to ask?

"If I was gonna be alone in that ring, I'd plan my act

all out and let you know just what it was going to be. I'd even demonstrate with a little shadow boxin' right here. But since there's gonna be somebody else in that ring with me—somebody can move and hit like him—I can't tell you exactly what's gonna happen. I'll plan for all eventualities and fight on from there."

In other words he didn't plan to step right in and try for an early knockout, or use the first few rounds to size things up and then move in, or try to outbox Aldi all the way and take it on points?

"Tryin' to add up a fight before it happens," Baby said, studying the glass of beer he hadn't drunk from, tilting it slightly toward him, "is just like tryin' to add and subtract and divide when you don't know the numbers. I fit my fight to the fighter. I never fought Aldi."

But he had to admit he did use a particular style that appeared in most of his fights? His use of left-jab, left-hook combinations, for instance. The way he liked to slip in kidney punches on a fighter who was trying to lean on him and tie him up. The tricky side-to-side footwork that threw an opponent off the target. Or what about the fight with Chavez—somebody comparable to him in speed—when he'd fought the whole fight on the basis of his advantage in reach but used all his other trademarked tricks to back it up? He had to admit he had a particular, identifiable style and merely emphasized one feature or another of it, depending on the opponent. •

"All right," Baby said. "Maybe all that's what you can call my *style*. And maybe when I'm training I plan to do certain things if it's *my* fight, the way I want it to be. Sometimes I get my way. Sometimes I get surprised.

And when I get surprised I change my style. I don't fight to show how smart I am or how good a style I got."

What did he fight for?

"I fight to win."

Dick paused and drank. He studied his notes a minute before he asked how did Baby feel about the Jorgensen fight and the way it had turned out. How did he feel about fighting again—maybe a little reluctant?

"I fight or I don't fight," Baby said. He was looking toward the door as if trying to decide whether or not to just get up now and walk through it. "If I got any reluctance, I keep it to myself. When I'm ready to feel reluctant in public, I'll quit fighting."

Dick scratched that last sentence down and, growing bolder, said, "I thought maybe the district attorney's inquiry might have made you a little—well, reluctant—about the whole business of fighting."

"You mean a couple of weeks ago? That wasn't anything that involved me. The assistant D.A. down there called up my manager and asked him and me to come down and answer a few questions, so we went. He didn't ask me anything he couldn't have asked me over the phone."

"What'd he ask you?"

Baby looked hard at him. "He asked me when I first knew I had Jorgensen in trouble."

"And what was your answer?"

"My answer was, I first knew I had him in trouble when we signed for the fight."

Dick smiled. He wrote it down. He could see that one in print, all right. "And what about Aldi—do you think you've got him in trouble too, now that you've signed?"

"Gettin people in trouble is the game I play," Baby said. "That's what fighting is. I didn't invent it. I just take part in it." Standing up as if he'd heard the ten-second buzzer, he said to Ronnie, "We gotta go, man, if we're gonna see that movie."

Leaving his untouched beer and his startled questioner at the table with no more than a nod as he walked on up past the bar and the couple of curious Puerto Ricans and out the door, Ronnie at his heels.

But Dick, shoving his notebook and his pencil into his inside coat pocket and buttoning his topcoat as he stood up, figured he hadn't done so bad. He felt a little smug, as a matter of fact. Almost happy.

He took that cab he'd promised himself, back downtown. Maybe Paul Sullivan would be around the office and he could nail down the weekend time schedule with him. A real nice day, all in all, even if it did look like rain.

9

IT WAS THE twenty-first of March—the first day of spring—that rainy morning Laine Brendan carried her bottle of urine specimen over to the doctor's office. Yet she wasn't aware of spring. In the past three weeks she had forgotten seasons and official dates to become acutely conscious of a private calendar, her own personal one, that contained three red-letter days which only she could name and which—as if Friday changed to Monday and the weekend never came—failed to announce themselves this month.

She was worried because she really knew. Knew vaguely the very first week when she'd tried to tell herself, "I've counted wrong." Knew more certainly a couple of weeks later when she'd gone to this doctor on Christopher Street and taken home the specimen bottle. Knew with a numb acceptance the morning she waited at home to hear the lab report.

And knew all the while the very night, the very moment, it had happened.

"If these were any help stopping actual pregnancy," the doctor told her when he gave her the first of three shots in the arm, "they'd be illegal. They sometimes bring on a delayed period—that's about all we can hope for."

Yet he needn't have been so archly definitive, for she didn't hope for anything, anyhow. Not then, and not a week later when she came home from his office assured, as far as it was scientifically possible to be assured, that she was pregnant. *Enceinte* the French called it. And what was it in Italian—*gravida*? How gay. How insufferably gay. And to think that life had chosen her (with a little help from Mr. James and little resistance from her) to be the gay recipient of it. At such a gay moment, too—the gay moment when she was so through with life that she wouldn't even honour it by resisting it. That had been precisely the gay moment life had chosen to honour her, instead. A gay idea, *non*?

The phone was ringing when she opened the door, and she let it ring—gaily. Taking off her coat and hat and shaking her head slightly to straighten her hair, an old foolish habit. Until finally at the sixth ring she walked over automatically and picked it up to shut it up.

It might have been her landlord asking her to move or her doctor saying the lab had made a mistake or her bank telling her she was overdrawn or Lillian Glidden inviting her to a party or an anonymous voice asking if this was the Du-Rite Dry Cleaning Shop or the person it was, Dick Willis, inquiring about Paris and inviting her on a weekend—she would have responded in exactly the same way, letting her voice respond for her but thinking nothing, feeling nothing, the world having suddenly become for her a collection of equals: all weekends equally gay, all men equally gay, all pregnancies equally gay, all questions, responses, pleas, poses, proposals, passions problems—all equally gay. All terribly gay.

Her moods, once so limber, once so much at the mercy of her active, inquiring self and her restless will, had somehow become fused into a single mood like a sustained note held through hours and days and weeks—come rain or shine, come Lillian Glidden bright and burbling or the coloured girl downstairs in tears because the husband she'd tried to forget had returned to haunt her again. Come Dick Willis' phone call or Dick Willis' pause-filling chatter on the train two days later—was it Saturday? Come Saturday, then, or Tuesday or Thursday or Sunday. Come Dick's question out of the blue, "So you and Baby saw quite a lot of each other, eh?" And her answer, "I suppose you could call it that. I don't want to talk about it." Come Paul Sullivan smiling there behind his glasses on the station platform, a sandy thin-haired man wearing a blue plaid mackinaw and a red duckhunter's cap; and the jeep he drove them to his damp half acrein—with its two big bare maple trees in front and its white frame corner house that sported a porch running along the two street sides. Come his wife at the door—an attractive, rather plump girl with wonderful complexion and lively dark eyes who wore her hair in a horse's tail that might have been too young for her years in other surroundings but seemed all right combined with her moccasins and slacks and red wool hunter's shirt—all props, like Paul's mackinaw and the jeep, of the atmosphere of domestic bohemianism (semirural Connecticut style) that the Sullivans and their neighbours so carefully cultivated. Come little towheaded Paul Jr. with a plastic fire engine as a present for Laine before she even got her coat off. Come the martinis.

It was four-thirty. That was what her watch said, anyhow. They were sitting around on the web-seat, tubular-modern chairs in the living-room and you could see a little of the Sound and you could hear her talking. She heard herself talking—like another person. She even laughed. She even observed that she rather liked the Sullivans, especially Carrie. That they might have become friends of hers in another world—a world that this observer of herself, this *true* self, could live in along with the participating person who was talking and whose name (anyone here would have been glad to tell you) was also Laine.

“. . . furious but hardly famous Village days”—she caught the scrap of conversation Paul threw over his shoulder as he turned to fill Dick’s glass; and though she knew he was answering something she’d just said, she couldn’t have repeated it or even named the subject. “There’s one over there. Not the saint—that’s something Carrie and I picked up in Mexico. The other one, the strike scene.”

“I like it,” she heard herself saying, looking dutifully toward the canvas framed on the wall across the room—its message, its flatness, its square crowded with figures suggesting Rivera and Orozco and the thirties it had come out of.

“I don’t.” Paul looked inquiringly at her glass, saw that it was still full, and set the cocktail mixer down. “I keep it around to remind me of the bad old days when I was liberal in my politics *and* my art. Trouble was, the public wasn’t very liberal with *me*—I think I sold a total of three paintings in four years. So one day I got tired of eating my unemployment checks and went to work

for an ad agency, and I've been happy ever since. True, Carrie?"

"True, Paul."

"Come over here, Junior," Paul said, "and tell them how happy your daddy is now that he's got you and a nice regular salary."

But Paul Jr., busy making adjustments in a miniature traffic jam, didn't budge. Instead he de jammed one of his two dozen cars and, holding it up, announced, "Car."

"That's right," Carrie said. "Blue car."

"Boo car," Paul Jr. said. "Pitty."

"Oh, come on now, Paul"—Dick spoke up out of the sunrise of his third martini—"don't try to tell me you wouldn't be happier back there on Washington Square painting what you felt like painting. I mean as an alternative to cartooning for laughs every day." He made a defensive gesture with his arm in Carrie's direction. "Don't get me wrong, I mean the job not the family. I'm an ardent supporter of family institutions and matrimonial states." He smiled at Laine; he was rising fast now, and he sipped.

"Washington Square?" Paul said, sitting down. "I never saw Washington Square. I had a lousy little room on Macdougall Street with a charming view of a year's worth of other people's trash. This is what I want"—but he was looking, not at Carrie or the baby, but out the window toward the Sound—"and this is what I've got. You've never seen the boat I bought last fall, have you? When the weather warms up I'll take you for a sail. Forty feet long and all yawl."

"Complete with galley," Carrie said. "It even floats."

Laine found herself floating, if that was the word, still farther back and away from them. And smiling, yes. In the right places. She smiled, she talked, she reacted on through dinner—they ate late, after Carrie had fed the baby and put him to bed—and anyone seeing her would have been sure she was among those present. Neither her pregnancy nor those old lost dreams of hers worried her any longer. She had left them behind, along with herself. Had come to Connecticut to view a happy compromise, a workable marriage, a livable attitude, and she was viewing them, not with detachment, but without being present at all.

Dick Willis, of course, was very much present. And he was all for happy compromises. He still had one in mind for her, Laine saw by the lingering looks he gave her as they sat around in the living-room after dinner, listening to the logs crack and hum and shift in the fireplace. He was only wondering whether he ought to try it here, tonight, after the Sullivans had gone to bed—or wait till he got her back to the city and a certain circumspect privacy.

And she didn't care, that was the point. She really didn't care, one way or the other. She wasn't present herself in any way that mattered, so how could what someone like Dick Willis did or did not do matter?

"I'd better show you both where you're going to sleep," Carrie said after Paul had yawned his third yawn in the space of five minutes. She put her glass on the table. "If I have another one of these I probably won't be in condition to show you anything."

"You've got so much to show, too," Paul said. "If you only would."

"All right, buster, remember there are ladies present." But she added a smile, a wifely concession.

And when she came back downstairs with Laine and Dick at her heels—there was a bathroom separating a tiny bedroom from a somewhat larger one in the back of the house upstairs, so they were pretty well prepared to handle an unmarried couple as weekend guests—Carrie said, "My plan now is to lure my yawning husband up to bed with me—but why don't you two stay and nurse the fire and go to bed whenever you like?"

"You don't have to keep your mind on the fire, either," Paul said. "I'll just put this screen in front of it and it'll take care of itself."

"How about it?" Dick asked when the Sullivans had said their goodnights and the house was big with silence and no cars passed any more on the street outside. "Didn't I tell you they were swell people?"

"They're happy people," Laine said. She was aware of his arm behind her on the back of the couch. "They know what they want and where they're going, don't they."

He laughed elaborately as if she'd just said something witty—leaning forward laughing so that his arm came in contact with her shoulders. "Well, I know what I want, too," he said, focusing on her through the warm whiskey glow. "But I have a hell of a time convincing you."

She didn't answer, and when he said something else to which she didn't even listen, and put his arm around her taking this new silence of hers as the clue to a new attitude toward him, and kissed her, she neither resisted nor responded. And he seemed to like it that way. He

' seemed to be encouraged. He seemed to think this was his night.

This *was* his night. All his. His and the Sullivans' and anyone else's who was still planning and proposing and acting and reacting in the world of the present. She knew that his mouth was smudged with her lipstick, that his hand was cool on her bare thigh, that his voice was saying, "Come on, Laine, let's go upstairs, it'll be better," that he was standing up now and she was allowing him to draw her up too. Yet it might have been someone else. It might have been someone else.

It might have been someone else when he came into her room ten minutes later and without turning on the light, with only the cold moonlight to see by, came over and slipped into bed with her. Taking her the way a man who has been unsure of his prize for too long a time takes his prize. Avidly. Uncritically.

So uncritically that he didn't seem to notice her lack of participation, the turning aside of her head in pain, not pleasure, her dead eyes. "So you see," he said afterward, lying flat on his back watching the smoke from his cigarette trouble the tunnel of moonlight that joined them with the night outside, "it was just one of those things that had to be. The way I always told you."

When they got back to New York the next evening, he insisted on coming all the way up to her apartment door with her. He was sober now and he sensed something wrong.

"You've been so quiet all day," he said on the last flight of stairs. "The Sullivans noticed it too. You're feeling all right, aren't you?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't answer. She had no words to answer with.

As she searched in her bag for the key and turned to put it in the lock, he said, "Do you mind if I come in for a while? It's only nine o'clock."

She was inside now, and offering a wan smile to him outside in the hall. "Goodnight," she said, showing no sign she'd heard him.

And closed the door—a positive act that was also in its way a negative one. For in closing the door on him, she was also closing the door for the last time on the senseless, insatiable, impossible world—a world that Dick Willis, with his engaging smile, his calculated campaign, his meaningless victory, represented as well as anyone else. Dick Willis was the world, and through him she thought she saw Paris too. She thought she saw a futile round robin of masculine meaninglessness that reproduced itself endlessly by violence, by brute strength, by dumb relentlessness. Reproducing itself as Paris had reproduced himself in her. Relating to no dream she'd ever had.

But had there ever really been a dream here? She looked around at this big room that hadn't been cleaned in a week—with its used coffee cup on a table, her jacket over the back of a chair, a bill and the torn envelope it had come in on the floor in front of the fireplace, dust and soot dulling everything—and she saw it all like a stranger's place, as unfamiliar as a propagandist's photo of a tenant farmer's shack. She saw no dream; and if there ever had been one, she saw that a dream is as transparent as air, too thin to hide even the tiniest reality when you looked at it closely, unemotionally, as she was looking at the shell of her life in this room now. Had she actually lived

“here all these months and years? Could she ever live here again?

Or anywhere?

Just call me the Village whore, she thought, and let it go at that. Or if you have to go on, just call me the shoddy romanticist, the dreaming idiot girl, or the pregnant experimenter with the heart that nobody bought because it was never put up for sale. Just call me dead.

Like an underscore to her emotions, she walked across the room and lifted a painting off the wall—the painting of Paris gazing out of his bright bars of blood. And set it against the leaning stack of canvases her mother had tidied up, turning it face down just as she’d done the night he saw it and recoiled from it. Then she stood surveying the room again, still wearing her hat and coat, still vaguely uncertain that she’d come back to the right apartment—that it could be so bare.

The phone! Oh yes and of course, the phone! And if it was Dick Willis still worried about her silence . . . Or her mother wanting to offer a half hour’s worth of advice . . . If it was anyone—anyone . . .

She didn’t quite believe what she heard him saying. The picture? What about the picture? “I guess I got a pretty good idea how you feel about me, but there was one thing I wanted. I wonder if you’d sell me the picture.”

“The picture?”

“That picture you made of me.”

A hysterical little laugh escaped her—like a small muted bell struck quickly twice. Had he been spying on her a moment ago?

“You can have it,” she told him. “I’ll send it to you. I suppose your address is in the book?”

But instead of answering he was talking about going into galleries on Fifty-seventh Street, about money, about asking people questions. She didn't understand.

"I figured you'd say you'd give it to me," he said, "so I went into these galleries on Fifty-seventh Street and asked them what it cost, a portrait that size by somebody good. They said five hundred or seven-fifty or a grand. So I'm gonna give you a grand for it—or anything more you want. For the picture," he added, as if to make sure she didn't think the grand was for something else.

"You can't give me anything, Paris," she told him. "I'll send it to you. Besides, they were talking about portraits and this isn't a portrait."

"What do you call it, then?"

"I suppose you could call it a piece of my imagination. It has nothing to do with the commercial art of portrait painting."

"All right," Baby said. "Whatever you want to call it, but I want to buy it from you—you name the price."

"I have no price, Paris."

He paused at that. "Can I come down and get it now?" he asked. "I'm in a place on Times Square with a couple of people—I can get away."

"I'm going out. I said I'd send it to you."

"I'll come down in the morning, then."

"I'm not sure I'll be home in the morning, either. I'll send it to you." She hesitated a bare moment before adding the same last word she had given Dick Willis. "Goodnight."

There was a little silence on his end, then he said goodnight too. She heard him hang up.

But it was fantastic—why had he called with this sudden

interest in the painting when he'd never mentioned it again after that one unappreciative moment when he'd first seen it? "You scare me out of ten years' growth"—that had been his reaction. "You're trying to get me killed"—that had been his answer to all she felt about him. Why the change?

If it's something more he wants from me, she thought, I can't give it to him. If he feels guilty for what happened the last time he was here, then he'll have to live with that—alone. There has to be an ending somewhere. And that was a final-enough ending.

She was standing on the same white rug on which their ending had been consummated: it seemed appropriate that she was standing here. So that's the night, she thought. That's the weekend. That's my life. And so to bed once more—like a good girl.

Or will it be a boy?

She couldn't sleep. The dozen positions she tried seemed to have no effect on the singing tension in her body, the dull ache in her forehead. She'd taken sleeping pills before—there were some in the medicine chest—yet she lay there a full half hour, starkly awake and finally alone, before getting up and going to the bathroom in her bare feet to brave the light and the linoleum.

She took two of them with a sip of water and screwed on the cap and put the little white bottle back on the shelf next to the toothpaste. Yet she continued to stand there. Not closing the mirror door of the medicine chest. Looking at the bottle. Then closing the door—and finding herself face to face with her own face.

The eyes huge, a stranger's eyes, and the hair a scarecrow's hair. The cheeks hollow. The whole face thinner

than she'd ever seen it. What a pretty girl, she thought.' She can't be a day over thirty-two. So much to live for, too.

And opening the door of the medicine chest again, she asked herself: Why not?

10

"LONDON," LOUIE SAID. "Paris. Europe. That's what you always said you wanted to do, ain't it?"

He was leaning his chair against the wall and Baby was standing and they were looking in the direction of, but not really watching, Sonny Boy and a new boy Louie had, named Red Summerby, sparring in the ring with Tree Top standing by watching the time to ring the bell.

"We could take off right after the fight. Get in half of June, stay through July—or the whole summer, we feel like it. Wouldn't even have to cost us anything. I could book a couple of setup bouts for you and pay the whole bill that way. How you feel about it?"

Baby nodded—without interest. "May be good idea," he said, not taking his eyes off the sparrers yet hardly seeing them. He had worked out this morning—a few miles of roadwork and some exercises, that was all—and he was taking the afternoon off like he usually took it easy the first couple weeks, slipping into the hard training the easy way. Wearing sneakers and a white jersey and his sailor's hat, though—his camp costume. So he wasn't going anywhere. He was on duty.

"What about the return bout?" he asked.

"That won't be till late August or maybe even September," Louie said, smoking contentedly. "Plenty time

for a trip abroad." He thought awhile. "Nother thing I'd like to do—either renovate this place or buy someplace bigger. Too small here. Be a lot more people around now. How you feel about gōin with me halves on that?"

"I like it here," Baby said.

"Yeah, but it's about ready to fall down, you said that yourself. When you're champion you gotta consider——"

Baby stood up. "Maybe be better to talk about it *after* I win the fight," he said, and walked outside to the side of the living cabin and sat down on a bench.

What's this new thing? he wondered, looking down across the lake to where some cabins were all colours like confetti in the sun. This new Louie. Like a man hears a vague rumour he's going to come by a million bucks and he's already got it run up in his mind to ten million before he even gets his hand on the *first* million.

He had never had any doubts about Louie as a manager. The first doubt came now. It's that kind of talk that gets you killed, he thought. Thinking you already won the fight instead of how to win the fight. Thinking like a champion instead of like what you are, a contender. Aldi is the kind of fighter I can maybe beat. That's all I want to do—take out the maybe.

Nobody was the same now that contract was signed. Not only Louie. Take Ronnie. Ronnie had been just his ace boy up till now. On his payroll. Helping out at camp. Sporting around with him between fights. But since that contract he thought he saw a new thing: Ronnie taking who Baby was going to be and who he, as Baby's ace boy, therefore was, to heart. Like suddenly butting in, saying, "Why don't I see when the feature goes on,"

when that sports writer collared them on '16th Street, cornering Baby into talking to the sports writer when he wasn't in a mood to; then sitting there silent and reverent all through the interview. He never was like that before, Baby thought. He was just my sidekick before, now he's an M.C. or something. But then I never signed the contract for the championship before, either, so maybe him and Louie were always like this, only the contract brought the real thing I never saw before out in them. Or is it just me?

It was strange.

It was like he doubted everything now, where he'd never doubted anything before—his fights, his life, his boys, his future. They were all smooth before. Now everything and everyone had a doubt standing behind it and him, roughing it and him up. Why? The contract?

It wasn't the contract.

Jorgensen, maybe?

Yeah, Jorgensen, but not just Jorgensen.

He was sneaking up on the answer, he could see himself doing it, and that was funny too because he'd never watched himself sneaking up on any answer before. He'd thought it or not thought it, that was the end of it. Now he found himself watching himself like a plain-clothes dick watching a suspect—knowing he had the right man and it was only a matter of time till he'd trip himself up. And he could see the suspect was getting nervous because suddenly, sitting there on the bench with the sun shining full on him out of the sky, he thought:

Something happened to the sun.

He could think crazy things like that now. "Something happened to the sun"—what did that mean?

Yet secretly he knew what it meant, and knew too what it meant when he thought: It's day but like night. I used to mark off day from night like rounds from rests, like play from training, but now it's all the same. I'm sitting or standing or walking or talking, day or night, and it's all the same, I'm always watching myself, like a suspect I'm gonna put the cuffs on the minute he sets foot in the real honest-to-god truth.

After all his thinking around it, was it just going back there that morning? He wondered at last. Was it just the way I reacted that morning—or was it all the other days that went before; the way I treated her and the way it all came out—me pleading there to see her like I never pleaded with anybody in my life before. Me going back with my good excuse, maybe to plead some more, maybe just to take the picture and leave, to show her I could take it and leave—I don't know. I'll never know. She had to be there for me to know, and she fixed it so I'll never know.

With me in mind? he wondered. But probably not even that. She told me not to come, that was the last thing she said. "I'll send it to you" and "goodnight," she said. And I said goodnight.

But I killed her. Even if she did it without me in mind, I killed her—just as sure as I'd done it that night I took her when she asked me to go. "Please," she said. And maybe *really* killed her—or let her die—because she was really dead then? Was she really all the way gone?

He remembered it backward, the evening papers first, which he'd bought at a corner news-stand and read sitting at a table in a downtown Harlem candy store he'd never been in before. "A woman," one had said,

"was found dead in bed in her Greenwich Village apartment late this morning. Police listed the death as a suicide. The dead woman was identified as Laine Brendan, 32, an artist, of so-and-so Morton Street. Apparently she took an overdose of sleeping pills before retiring last night, according to police. Mrs. Brendan was divorced and lived alone. Her body was discovered by a friend, Lillian Glidden, of so-and-so Vandam Street, who entered the apartment shortly before eleven o'clock this morning. Miss Glidden told police that she became worried about Mrs. Brendan after calling her on the telephone for two days and getting no answer. A janitor in the building let Miss Glidden into the apartment with a passkey. On finding the body she telephoned police."

He got the next day's papers too; read them at home. Most of them didn't say anything, but one of them said something he read and reread. "An autopsy showed that Mrs. Brendan was pregnant." Adding: "Police who questioned friends of Mrs. Brendan said they could give no reason for the apparent suicide, although the attractive blonde painter, well known in New York art circles, had been nervous and unable to work for the past two years. The body was claimed by Mrs. Brendan's mother, Mrs. Andrew F. Wheelwright, of Huntington, L. I."

And that was all, that was the end. But that wasn't all of the story.

The rest of the story was the bell he pushed but got no answer; the stairs he climbed—three flights, fast; the door he found unlocked; the mussed-up studio he stood in saying, "Anybody home?"; and the painting of himself he looked for on the wall and found gone, an empty space.

He expected her to walk in on him from another room. When she didn't, he walked in on her, and he knew the moment he saw her—clued by her crumpled look, confirmed by instinct—that she wasn't just sleeping, she was dead. He even listened to her heart and felt her pulse. She was dead.

Almond-skinned man in a white-skinned world, old-side-kick of danger in roped-off spaces, he'd identified his own emotion then. Fear backed him out of there like a killer on the run—closing the door tight, passing no one on the stairs, getting into the car and heading for home. Only then beginning to regret what he'd done, leaving her there. Only then forgetting about the pale-skinned cops and what they'd make out of finding a nigger in a dead white girl's apartment. Only then forgetting himself, the person he'd always looked after first, and remembering her. Only then thinking: Should I call the cops now and tell them to go up there—even if they trace the call and pick me up, or nail my accent and hunt me down? Even if there's trouble and plenty of it and it means the fight is off?

He'd done nothing, just worried—the sparkle of spring beyond the windshield passing him by. And the biggest jolt yet to come—which was not whether she'd died normally or killed herself, but a single line in the paper account: "Mrs. Brendan was pregnant."

From me? he'd thought.

He knew.

In some oblique kind of way he knew he'd killed her—as sure as if he'd doped her drink with all those sleeping pills. Killed her by being what he really was, not what she thought he was. Killed her by not caring.

It was too late now. He was going on, being what he was and would be after he met Aldi. It was too late now.

He didn't know whether he felt like laughing or crying. But he could still react, because when Spunky Rowles came up to him without his even noticing and said "Chowtime, Baby," he got up automatically and walked on into the kitchen behind Spunky and his pancake turner.

If Baby noticed a change in almost everybody around him during those weeks, it was also true that almost everybody around him noticed a change in him.

Louie did. Louie pushed him. "You're punchin that bag like a sleepwalker," Louie said his third week of training. "Man, what's come over you? You gonna have to wake up."

And when he dropped in to see his mother one Saturday when he got to town, she said, "You're mopin around somethin awful. What's eating on you?"

"I've been trainin hard," he said, stretched out on the couch and looking up at the ceiling. "I'm in a tiring business."

"Then get out of it," she said, "if it's gonna make you like this."

"I'll get out of it one of these days," he told her. "Somebody'll knock me out of it."

He didn't even go into the Tavern, didn't even talk to anybody in town except a couple of casual acquaintances he ran into on the street—an old ex-pug with an L-shaped nose who borrowed a ten off him, and Clarice, who left a girlfriend standing on a corner and came running up

to say not much of anything for five or ten minutes. He dropped by his apartment for a while just to see it was all there, and it was all there: the fireplace with the wood the woman who came in to clean once a week had stacked inside it, the trapdrums he never played anymore, the blond furniture that the man at the store who'd sold it to him had called "unique, modernistic, and up-to-date." He picked up Ronnie and headed back the same day.

The sports writers came, more and more of them as April changed into May and the Day crept closer. The public came too—on weekend afternoons when Louie let as many of them as had a dollar and could crowd into the training cabin crowd in and watch Baby spar.

"We get to be champ, we just *got* to build a bigger gym or else move over to Pompton for the training," Louie said. "There's money in these crowds and they don't know where we are and can't get in when they do."

"They come because I killed a man," Baby answered. "That's what you got to do to get famous."

"You're hittin clean," Louie said one weekday after Baby had sparred three rounds with Sonny Boy who was fast and three rounds with Red Summerby who could hit and two rounds with Wide Boy who could take it. "I like your timing. You move. But there's somethin wrong."

"Like what?" Baby asked. Tree Top was rubbing him down.

"You're hittin too easy. Act like you're afraid of hurting somebody. Man, we only got two more weeks. This is no time to be savin the opposition."

"No more light bag," Louie said the next day. "Just

the heavy bag all the rest of the week. I want to see you move in and murder it."

Baby murdered it, three days in a row, and the fourth day he knocked out Red Summerby in the second round of sparring with a short right that Red Summerby never saw coming.

"Now we're movin'," Louie said, watching Doc Stacy break an ammonia capsule under Red Summerby's nose. "He's okay—he's comin around." He treated himself to a new cigar. "You look like the old Baby now," he said. "We're movin'."

So many writers and fans came up one Sunday afternoon that their parked cars clogged the parking space and extended bumper to bumper all the way down the drive to the highway. There must have been forty sports writers and three times that many fans up to the Half 'n Half that Sunday. It was Sunday before the Tuesday when Baby and Louie and company would fly out to Chicago and the weigh-in and the fight. The second-last Sunday.

But Baby tried to stay away from them. "I got nothin to say," he told Louie. "You do the talkin'."

So Louie did the talking. "He never likes to talk much when he's training," Louie told the sports writers. They remembered different. They remembered another Baby, a more casual if not a more friendly one, who had talked quite a lot before other fights. But clustered around the indoor sparring ring as attentively and critically as relatives around a bride before her wedding, they could find nothing wrong with the sparring. He was sharp and fast and contained, more vicious than ever. "A fair-to-middling middleweight mauler named Red Summerby fought five furious rounds with the next middleweight

champion of the world up here at this somewhat decrepit, but nonetheless comfortable, training camp yesterday afternoon," wrote Harvey Bieberman in a Monday story. "Gawked at with solemn respect by the largest mingling of sports writers and boxing fans ever to crowd into the collective enterprise that its two proprietors call the Half 'n Half, Paris 'Baby' James, half of the Half, gave the aforementioned Mr. Summerby a lesson in boxing technique that he ought to be grateful for. He couldn't have received it from any other boxer in the ring today.

"Baby, who can hit harder retreating than most fighters can hit going forward, based his lesson soundly on a stinging, stunning left jab that turned into a hook faster than the eye—or Mr. Summerby—could see. During the first couple of rounds, he was content to let Summerby come to him for the instruction, stepping delicately under, inside, or outside of Summerby's rock-throwing rights, and working combinations that played back and forth from the body to the head with awesome versatility.

"Summerby, a redheaded Negro who looks as though one more meal will make a heavyweight out of him, got a little tired of the instruction midway in the sparring, so Baby obliged by delivering the lessons right to his door. Using the fancy footwork and the flirting feints that made novices out of old ring dogs like 'Irish' Joe Balton and the late Jimmy Jorgensen, Baby demonstrated his knowledge of corporeal geography with kidney and solar-plexus punches and a master's degree of precision. His pupil bowed and grunted in homage.

"Before school was out for the day, the 8-5 favourite to trim Tony the Terrible Aldi in their goldplated M.W.

championship bout in the Windy City showed that he can be as tireless as he is cute. He took on two other stablemates, Teddy Alonzo, 162 for four, and Sonny Boy Harriot, 144, for three. Neither Alonzo, who was aping Aldi's rolling, turtle-backed aggressiveness, nor Harriot, a speedy young welterweight who has everything but a punch, could pull a single trick on teacher. At the recess bell everybody in the crowd except a couple of spies from Aldi's Gleason's Gym headquarters broke out in applause. Aldi, we're sure, is going to hear about this. And the ape man isn't going to like it a bit.

"The day after tomorrow, Baby and troupe fly to Chicago, where he'll spend a week in a gym giving his razor-edged technique a final stropping. The Hairy One, who breaks camp tomorrow, has the toughest beard that Baby has ever tried to trim, but we pick the Harlem hot-shot to give Aldi a close shave—or worse—when the lather and leather start flying a week from Wednesday at the Stadium. T Viewers (Channel 2) are hereby warned to bolt their sets to the floor."

Ronnie showed the story to Baby while Baby sat on the side of his cot taking his shoes off.

"Everybody won this fight already 'cept me," Baby said. "How could that be?"

"There's another article there about Aldi," Ronnie said. "Over there on the left."

Baby looked longer at the byline than he did at the story. It said *By Dick Willis* and he thought, That's the guy was with her the first time I ever saw her—who stopped me that time on '16th Street the week before she died. Against his better judgement he had an urge to look him up, to ask about her, and maybe even find

out something about the pregnancy and the suicide. But it was only a passing thought.

He pretended to read the story, seeing phrases about Aldi's charging-bull sparring, about "the massive hirsute mauler boring in with a furious body attack and pain-packed uppercuts," about "the lemon-coloured six-footer whose long arms and legs gave the illusion, if not the opposition, of the brown-skinned whirlwind Aldi will be facing for the crown," about "a spectacular, well-contoured redhead who sat silently on one of the folding chairs at ringside and turned out to be none other than Mrs. Anthony Aldi herself, whom the brawny champ calls 'Gorgeous' with fair accuracy"—but he was busy tracking down and tripping up his own thoughts all the while, admitting to himself that his real reason for wanting to talk to that sports writer was not to find out more about her, but to somehow prove that the responsibility he felt was all wrong; that there were actually a dozen other people in her life who'd treated her worse than he had; that he was free, absolved, like the suspect the cops say "Go on, you're cleared" to and turn out into the world again, free without trial.

"He'll be hard to get to," Baby said because Ronnie was waiting there expecting him to say something. "He's built compact and he learned how to use it."

He looked at the cartoon at the top of the page, signed in the corner with the initials P.S. It showed Baby knocking out two sparring partners at the same time, one with each hand, and Aldi, a crown riding his headgear, looking on saying, "If dey was as good as me, he'd be champ awready."

"To hell with them," Baby said, folding up the paper

and tossing it back to Ronnie. "I don't want to read this crap. I'm turning in."

"Only quarter to nine," Ronnie said, getting up. "You never got so much sleep before."

"I never needed so much," Baby answered, taking off his socks. "Sleep and the championship—that's all I need. Then I'm through."

Ronnie was looking at him. "What you mean by that?"

"Nothing," Baby said. "Turn off the light, will you, when you go out?"

11

ON ALL THE STREETS and avenues that led to the Stadium, cops stood at every intersection sweating their uniforms black and sassing the cars that nudged past, foot by foot, in endless double file—honking and braying and troubling the late-spring air. On the sidewalks programme hawkers hawked their programmes and newsboys sold their papers and ticket scalpers pleaded with passersby to turn their tickets into cash. A real Chicago jam, hectic and pell-mell like a big strike or a race riot.

“Do you think we’ll make it?” Dick asked. He was leaning forward on the edge of the seat as if he could make the cab go faster that way. “There’s only one prelim before the main bout and it’s eight thirty-five already.”

“I’m doin my best, buddy,” the cabbie said from under his cap. “You show me how I can do any better, I’ll do it.”

“You’ll miss it yourself,” Dick told him.

“Miss what?”

“The fight. Aren’t you going to take time off and go and watch this one on TV?”

“Hell, no,” the cabbie said, not turning his head. “I got enough fights at home with my wife. I don’t have to watch nobody else’s fights.”

"Guess I'd better get out here," Dick said when they'd taken ten minutes to go another block. "Gimme a half a dollar out of that."

He pushed his way along the sidewalk, passing up the creeping cars, feeling at his inside coat pocket a couple of times to make sure the squeezes he was going through weren't pickpocket squeezes. A presentiment of something like personal failure had hung over him all day—both at the weigh-in, watching Tony Aldi step on the scale in his monogrammed yellow silk underdrawers while the boxing commissioner adjusted the weights and the flashbulbs went off; and here now as he had his ticket torn and mobbed forward to the ringside entrance. He wasn't used to presentiments and he didn't like it.

Hearing Baby in his white dressing gown kid Aldi at the weigh-in: "One more square meal for you, Tony, I could have won that title just letting you get on the scale," he'd felt an unwelcome blooming of regret and nostalgia through his whole body. Why? Was it the presence of this cool kidder who reminded him of Laine and who he felt intuitively had been the reason she'd treated him so distantly the day after their only night?

She'd cared about Paris James more than she had about him, that was what he somehow knew. And no woman ought to kill herself right after sampling your best bed manner. Her suicide lingered in his mind like a final colossal insult to his manhood. He tried to feel sorry about what she'd done, and even to understand it on terms other than his own. But his wounded pride always took over; and his wounded pride, he sensed, was involved with Baby.

As the fighters finished having their weights recorded, and their eyes looked into and their hearts heard, and Aldi lied belligerently to the Press about his weight problem ("I got no weight problem," Aldi, eight pounds lighter than the 168 he'd weighed three weeks ago, said), a curious temptation had made Dick want to move up close to Baby and say casually, "Too bad about Laine, Brendan." Would Baby's reaction have changed the whole history of the 160-pound division? Or did he even know she was dead—or care?

It had been a mean whim which he'd suppressed. Mean to the only contemporary fighter he admired, and mean to her dimming memory which he hadn't honoured by sending flowers. He wasn't sure what had made him want to say that. He wasn't sure why he should want to rough up Baby about something that was over.

Maybe, he'd thought, riding back from the boxing commissioner's office with another sports writer, maybe the uncomfortable idea that there were only three kinds of people in the world had inspired it: Laine with her wild-eyed devotion to all her own visions, wherever they led her. Baby with his fanatical devotion to a fleshy art that would lead him to all those worldly dollars. And himself, a fairly comfortable sports writer with a devotion to nothing except compromise to keep himself fairly comfortable. Ticked off like that, he felt them both admirable and himself contemptible—and stumbled toward them half consciously because he sensed that they in their opposite ways were something he wanted to be, even while resenting them for being what they were. What did you call it? he wondered. Was it some kind of purity they had and he didn't?

Hurrying down the aisle behind an usher, he got the hot breath of the crowd full in his face and looked around at this rowdy assembly as if he hadn't seen a thousand like it before. It was all new—like seeing his first prize-fight crowd. And he sensed something new about himself. Something new clouded, with a hazy presentiment of failure and danger and loss.

Welterweights were going at it as he settled down in third row ringside and nodded to a couple of sports writers he knew. He'd never seen one of the fighters before, a brawny local hero tagged Kid Koske on the programme. But he recognized the other as a fast but hardly fearsome coloured boy, Sonny Boy Harriot, a stablemate of Baby's whose swiftness had saved his looks and his record in nineteen out of twenty-one fights. Dick turned away from the ring to look around him—when the crowd's cry raised his eyes in time to catch Sonny Boy cornered and helpless and abruptly plummeting to the canvas, while Koske, gloves lowered, stood over him for a moment before turning and trotting to a neutral corner.

Almost before the referee had finished the count, Tree Top and Doc Stacy were in the ring dragging their bloody-nosed boy over to the stool in the corner—wiping him, talking to him draping his shoulders with towels. Signalling the mike down out of a blue tobacco cloud and raising one big mitt of Koske's, the announcer crowed the news that was already old—getting scattered cheers from a crowd still pouring in that gulped down this toothsome little prelim as greedily and non-committally as a diner finishing off his appetizer and looking around for his steak. Dick counted eight bored platinum blondes

in the audience, each equipped with a lipstick-blobbed mouth and half-mast eyes and the standard plump middle-aged escort in the conservative suit and the jazzy tie. Plenty of Aldi rooters among the blocks of first- and second-generation Italians here. And plenty of Baby fans among the big turnout of negro men, dressed for the kill, and their women fat and thin, fantastically beautiful in their transformations and their swaying pendant earrings or as gross and comic as dressed-up brown bears. There was Dempsey over there. And Barney Ross. And there beyond them was a big Sunday-night television star whose name slipped Dick's mind. But famous or not, they were a crowd first and themselves second. Their cough and scrape and hum ran in a long tide of sound under the storm of organ music that, now Sonny Boy and Koske were gone, trembled through the great bowl of the Stadium.

The ring was empty now. On the canvas near the ropes was a fresh red smear of blood.

Seeing it as he stood up to let somebody by, Dick saw the ring gleaming there as a white patch under the powerful overhead lights, with the sweep of crowd surrounding it in a tiered black-and-white pattern of latent violence. The ring's isolation in the midst of the crowd's murmur was something like the desolation of a battlefield after one battle has ended and before another has begun.

The lights across the Stadium all went out. The organ was silent; the crowd's croon of chatter died. Into this cavern of semi-silence, spotted from somewhere near the ceiling, two long poles of light plunged down. They felt their way back and forth over the audience before they

crossed in a giant cross and anchored on doors a quarter of the Stadium apart.

The doors opened, almost simultaneously. From each emerged a fighter—one black, one white. One a champion of the great gods Strength and Courage and Aggressiveness. The other a hero of split-second shrewdness and a dedicated manhood that had honed his talents endlessly and aimed them all at this June night.

A low rumble of passion greeted them. A long train of manager and trainer and doctor and handlers and friends preceded and followed each of them as they made their way with painful slowness toward the ring and toward each other—down the long aisles. Their slowness, their solemnity, the calf-length, towel-hooded robes they wore, somehow suggested a strange wedding about to take place here. And Dick remembered reading somewhere about weddings a couple of centuries ago—was it in Hungary?—where it was traditional for the bride to battle the groom for three or four nights before, bloody and scratched and weary, he finally took her. But both fighters looked like brides in those towels and robes. They came in as equals for a contest to decide which one was lord and master, in a ceremony public right down to the fleshy struggle and the bloody domination.

Three-quarters of that long distance to the ring, the champion in the leopard-skin robe halted and the crowd applauded him—while Baby continued on. As he ducked through the ropes and faced Doc and Louie and Tree Top with no shadow-boxing, no overhead handshake, only a half-raised glove to greet the crowd, he got a pale cheer that was nothing like the roar that went up

when Tony Aldi entered the ring turning his thick rugged body slowly around with one mighty arm raised high for all the world to gaze at.

Giving up his robe and revealing a natural vest of wiry black hair, the leopard man crouched and shuffled his feet and pumped a few hearty lefts and rights into an airy breadbasket. Baby sprawled on the stool that Tree Top pushed under him, his towel gone but his robe still on. Abe Stein didn't second his fighter; he was at ringside. But Aldi's trainer, a short log of a man wearing the white sweater saying ALDI on the back that all three of Aldi's seconds wore, kept chattering away at his man like a nervous mother sending her offspring out into the terrible world for the first time; getting grunts now and then in answer. Louie Jackson said nothing to Baby. He offered him the water bottle but Baby waved it away. Louie wiped Baby's face with a towel. It was hot under those ring lights. It was hot out here where Dick Willis sat, too. Hot from the lights and the sweating mob.

While the announcer leafed through a handful of paper and began his spiel about next week's fight, Dick watched Baby standing up and taking off his robe at last, flexing his chest and shoulder muscles and breathing deep by moving his arms alternately flap-wing fashion. Seeing the fragile grace of this man so calm before the threat of the barrel-sized bludgeoner he was about to meet, it occurred to him then: Christ, she was right. Why shouldn't she have preferred him to me? I'm a puffy scribbler who never took a chance on anything. He's the man who takes the chances. He's the man in the ring.

He shifted his position in his seat, uncomfortable with what he saw was a minor revolution in his thinking.

“This, ladies and gentlemen,
Is the feature bout of the evening
Matched by the International Boxing Club
Judged and supervised by the Illinois Athletic Commission.
The attending physicians at ringside, Dr. Samuel Poswolsky
and Dr. August A. Spinelli
The timekeeper, Frank White
Counting for the knockdowns at the bell, Roger F. O’Hara
The judges, Nicholas J. Frazier and Mark Gottlieb
Your referee, Al Pallini.
For the Middleweight Championship of the World
Fifteen rounds.
In the corner on my left
From the Harlem section of New York City
Weighing one hundred and fifty-five pounds
Wearing red trunks with white stripes
The challenger, Baby James.
In the corner on my right
From Detroit, Michigan
Weighing one hundred and fifty-nine and one half pounds
Wearing white trunks with blue stripes
The Middleweight Champion of the World
Tony Aldi.
Three more bouts will follow.”

This was it, yet even now, facing Aldi here in the middle of the ring with their seconds around them and the referee between them reciting the rules, he felt nothing and thought nothing. It had all been felt, it had all been thought.

He came out with that long teasing left probing Aldi’s face like a surgeon’s finger looking for sensitive areas. But Aldi came tunnelling hard toward him in a turtle crouch, left raised like a heavy cannon, right swishing the air as Baby let it go by and lifted a short left hook under Aldi’s ribs and stung him three short jabs on the side of

the head as neat as practice punches on the light bag. Then stepped out of the way clean with a sidestep-and-turn on Aldi's next low rush and let him go on by like a fast express at a whistle-stop crossing.

He felt this iron man's strength and heat and fury as he went by. He felt how much this iron man liked being champion as Aldi turned and plunged in again, same tactics, same crouch and up-pointed left and air-singeing right thrown heedlessly as if Aldi had all the rights in the world to waste if only one would solidly land. He felt this man was the strongest man he'd ever fought, the most determined and the best armoured, and he stayed his distance respectfully, content with counter-punching for these opening minutes, but watching that right and sensing that that heedless right was the clue—a kind of tab you could eventually pull to open up this whole championship package with one clean countering left.

No clinching at all in the first four rounds, not by Aldi's choice—he wanted to get in close and butt and body-punch and uppercut and clinch and bear down—but Baby's. Al Pallini hurried around them from one side of the ring to the other with nothing to do and nothing to say. Baby took a right under the heart in the fifth, and felt the power. He stood his ground for a moment then, uppercutting Aldi, cutting at his eye with two sharp rights that broke an old scar and brought blood. And Aldi came on hard and for the first time he let him, letting Aldi carry him back against the ropes, tying up his body-punching and measuring the full weight of this man he had to beat—a lot of weight.

“Break clean.”

Aldi slipped in a short right to the body on the break,

but Baby's face didn't change, he didn't look at the referee, he just let Aldi keep coming. He showed him what it feels like to shadowbox when the shadow can hit back. He cut him, cut him, cut him; cut and bruised that mash-nosed, lugubriously solemn face and it kept coming back for more. He showed him what a short distance it is between a left to the kidney and a left to the jaw, and crossed a right to the nose and felt a two-handed hurricane at his stomach that hurt and let Aldi's lifted left go skyscraping up past his jaw with a shrug to the side, planting a hook hard into the ribcage opening, drifting away with a long left goodbye.

"You're doin all right," Louie said, taking out Baby's mouthguard. "Just stay your distance and lash him to pieces. Lash him like he never been lashed before. You're way ahead; just don't take no chances 'cept on a sure thing."

Through the sixth and seventh and eighth that relentless shuffle and duck-and-roll defence of Aldi's carried him forward as if the price for his courage were not this flat, mock-serious face swelling blue from mouses under both eyes and bleeding from a torn lip. As if one of his punches really was worth five of Baby's in return. Regarding him from his distance, hearing the crowd's roar carry each of Aldi's arced left leads towards him, Baby felt that Aldi's assault was the crowd's assault; that he was fighting the crowd as well as Aldi—for no cheers, only long murmurs, greeted his own cutting combinations. And that was all right, wasn't it? Those were the terms he'd always fought under, weren't they? They could cheer till their eardrums busted, this was his fight, he was in charge; they couldn't take this fight away from him.

"I'm gonna try to do it this round," he told Louie at the end of the eighth, as Doc Stacy draped a towel over his shoulders and Tree Top set the buckets next to his stool.

"He looks strong to me," Louie said, "Just go on the way you been, that's the safe way."

"I'm gonna give him his 'big chance this round,'" Baby said, "and see what he's got."

Louie didn't say a word. Doc Stacy held out Baby's elastic as the ten-second buzzersounded. Louie just looked into Baby's face.

And Baby went out to reverse the whole trend of the fight—to stop backing up and reduce his area of movement from ring-size to the space around a punching bag. But that weight was still there and so was the power and Aldi kept coming on at the body, his assurance only slightly dimmed, his broad dark face ballooning and mottling under its blue stubble. Baby broke his burrowing one-armed clinch before the referee could speak and saw Aldi's right coming in and hit him the short hook to the jaw he'd been waiting for—aiming not at that jaw but two feet the other side of it, so that he actually hit *through* the jaw and felt the champion's whole body give. But Aldi didn't fall as three dozen other fighters had fallen after Baby's best left hook. Aldi rebounded off the ropes with both arms swinging, missing two lefts and a right in his overwhelming abandon and catching Baby a wild right on the ear that—

He was sitting down on the canvas looking at Aldi's knobby knees. Then the knees were gone and the referee was back beside him, picking up the count at four. He was up at five. He wasn't hurt. That wild rush had pushed

him off balance so that a side-of-the-head blow could knock him down.

The whole Stadium was standing, yelling, as the referee held him for the eight-count, then wiped off his gloves and waved the champion in. And propelled by the crowd's wild cheer and his own vast pride, the champion came rushing in to throw everything he didn't have at a target that was once more a punishing shadow, more elusive than ever. The set look in Aldi's eyes showed that only one man had been hurt this round, but only he and Baby, not the crowd, knew which of them it was.

"Let him have that round," Louie said in the interval. Baby burned with sweat; his ear felt numb; his stomach had been punished. "Do what I tell you. Stay away and cut him up. Use your left. You already won this fight, you just stay away from him. Bleed him good."

"He's trying to take me out," Baby said. "I'm gonna take him out instead."

"Listen to me," Louie said, but the bell cut him off and Baby went out to take out his man.

Let him clinch—when they broke, both men were stained with blood, Aldi's blood, all of it. Aldi came ploughing back in, straight into a solar-plexus left and a chop of a right and grabbed and held on as eagerly as a mother clutching her long-lost child. He's mine, Baby thought. He hooked and hammered him at will now, and learned again from the crowd's approval what the crowd had really come to see: not Aldi win, but anyone win. A champion, any champion, rising out of them in a reckoning of blood was what they wanted. He could give it to them now.

Even above that fifteen-thousand-throated scream he

heard Louie Jackson shouting, "One good right, Baby, one good right." Somewhere out there his sisters were watching and yelling—and his mother tuned in on TV, and Clarice. Everyone he knew except one person he knew. That nose split up the nostril; that right eye was closed; every motion Aldi made was slow-motion counterpoint to his own. Yet this man who'd never been knocked off his feet was not going to be knocked off his feet now. He was going to die for it.

Let him die for it, he thought—and suddenly saw, as Aldi groped forward taking a right full in the face, that face framed in a rectangle, hung on a wall—where he'd seen only his own face before behind a curtain of blood through which Aldi's face now looked out at him. Startled and repelled as if it were still his own face he saw, he checked the left he was about to throw, fainted instead, and stepped aside to let Aldi stumble by and turn and try to find him again with those bar-room swings. For the first time inside a ring he checked his instincts as a fighter. He checked the kill. Let him live. And as he stepped outside an unaimed right and tossed a light token left like a taunt at Aldi's unprotected chest, he heard a wet blanket of disappointment settle over the blood-hot blaze of screams around him.

They wanted the finish. They could go on waning.

He gave them another powderpuff left instead, backed away from this blind rush of courage, glanced at the referee but the referee wasn't going to stop the fight, he was as confused as the crowd by Baby's reluctance. Where was the bell? Aldi managed to grab him with his left and pump in two rights to his kidney, and as Baby slipped away he felt Aldi's blood sticky on his side under

his arm and he never wanted to be touched again by this man trying so hard to be his victim. Aware of the press cameras edged forward all around the apron begging for the knockout, he gave them instead a virtuoso demonstration of evasion, pointing out with mild blows on Aldi's shoulders and forearms and forehead all the places a man could be hit and not hurt. He gave them everything they'd come not to see—and heard this whole arena react, after that settling of silence, to a greatness he didn't feel.

A flush of applause near the ringside rippled out until half the people here were applauding what they'd never applauded at a fight before. They mistook his repulsion for pity, and framed the new champion in a frame of their own—an ovation that continued even after the bell sounded, even as Aldi's seconds helped him to his corner and wiped off his blood and vaselined his cuts and talked frantic words into his battered ears.

He saw the ring doctor over there now, looking into Aldi's eyes with a pencil flashlight, talking to him—then saying something to Pallini at his elbow. And as Pallini turned and came toward Baby's corner, that ovation of hands changed to an ovation of cheers; the whole Stadium was standing as the referee held up Baby's bloody-gloved right and cops clambered into the ring to cordon it. "On the advice of the ring physician," the announcer was saying, "the referee stops the fight at the end of the tenth round. Winner by a technical knockout and new World's Middleweight Champion . . ."

He let them have their way with him. Let Doc and Tree Top pull off his gloves and cut the tape from his hands and drape his robe over him. Let the announcer lead him from one side of the ring to the other to give the photo-

graphers all the shots they wanted. Let Aldi turn his back and duck out of the ring when he went over to pat him on the shoulder and say something like "You fought a good fight." Let Louie hold the upper rope as he climbed out of the ring himself and, squired by half a dozen cops, headed up the aisle toward the dressing-room through a crowd that was silent, confused by its own demonstration.

Applause or no applause, he didn't really care. His big evening had come and gone, but even with his sweat still up, his breathing still deep, his reflexes still ready, he knew it hadn't been the evening he'd counted all his life on. Something had happened to him these last few months. Something he'd staked his whole life on had seen its own face on a piece of canvas, seen its reflection on a round white rug, and seen its double tonight, lifesize. He couldn't look at it again. He was through.

12

PAST A NAMELESS TOWN, past a new low tan factory big as an acre, past a desolate airfield out there, past the flat brown cluttered earth—the train raced toward a horizon it never reached, heading east, and Louie sat in the seat across from Baby, studying him, not believing his own ears.

“This is the weirdest talk I ever heard from you,” Louie said. “I don’t see how you can mean it.”

Through the flickering telephone poles Baby watched an old car, same model as the old car he’d bought years ago with the first money he earned as a fighter—a battered Ford convertible coupé—pace the train along a parallel highway for half a mile before the train edged ahead and passed it, leaving it behind.

He looked back at Louie. “I mean it,” he said.

“It don’t make sense,” Louie said. “This is what we both been workin ten years for. This is when we start makin *real* money.”

He heard the words. They didn’t sound like anything.

“We were goin to Europe and have some fun” Louie said, his voice lower as if everything he’d ever planned had suddenly become improbable. “Then, late summer,

us on the big percentage end for a change when we give Aldi the return. What are you gonna do with yourself you retire now?"

"Hang around," Baby said, "and spend my new twenty grand."

Through the open door of the compartment came the whelp and yelp of Doc and Tree Top and Ronnie and Sonny Boy next door, all joyfully claiming they were being cheated in a game of hearts.

"Why?" Louie asked.

"I'm sick of fightin'." Baby looked out the window again, almost expecting to see the Ford out there. "So I'm quittin'."

"Well, that can happen to a man," Louie said philosophically. "Then it wears off and you change your mind. Only I never heard it happen before when you *win*. Usually when you *lose*. And just when you probably got the easiest year of your life ahead of you. I don't know if Aldi'll even want to fight you again."

"He'd fight me again tomorrow," Baby said.

"What makes you think so?"

"He likes to fight," Baby said. "I don't."

"Dinner is now being served," said a waiter at the door. "Dining car two cars forward, gentlemen."

"All I ask," Louie said as they went through the door to pick up their troupe, "let's keep this to ourself for a while till we think it over. Okay?"

"I'm glad," his mother told him, and that was all.

"I'm glad too," his sister Selma said. "Only I can't figure out what's happened to you. What are your plans now?"

"I'll be a'round," Baby said.

"Well, one thing you better be around for 'is Lee's wedding next month. Or haven't you heard?"

"Her wedding?" Baby said. "Since when's she gonna have another wedding?"

"To Mr. Chris Croft," Selma said. "Of the Liberty Billiards Parlour Crofts. It was all decided last week but she was afraid to tell you after what you said about him one time."

"I got nothin against him except he's a loudmouth and a phony. What does she want to marry an old man for? He'll be seein fifty any day."

"He proposed," Selma said. "Ain't that enough reason?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess it is. Okay, we'll give a big party."

"Mr. Retired Champion," Selma said. "You're more than I can figure out."

Driving up the highway out of New York to the Lynne-dale Country Club to play golf that sunshining June day, he told Ronnie. And Ronnie, sitting there looking at the cars ahead, didn't say anything.

They never got around to discussing it, not then and not in the days afterward when he saw Ronnie. And his mother never mentioned it again either—he didn't know why; he thought she'd be so pleased she'd talk all the time about it. Yet there was the silence in her apartment and the silence other places too, like at the Tavern; though he'd told nobody except Ronnie outside his own family. People knew your business even if you didn't tell it, and the silence and the looks got under his skin so much that

finally he was asking himself the same question the silence asked:

If you're not a fighter, then what are you?

He didn't have an answer. Or rather, the answer he had was just like no answer at all. It went:

If you're not a fighter, then you're nobody.

It wasn't an answer.

He tried out the drums in his apartment, but it was lonely. Playing the drums to records—bop and swing and jazz. Kidding along the idea of getting together a small combination and playing in nightclubs. He saw he wasn't as good as he had been when he'd kept in practice, but he could be good again with a few weeks' work. Pretty good, anyhow—the way he had been. He saw also that the whole idea was crazy. Him starting out in a completely new profession, the amateur second-rater acting like he was eighteen years old, was crazy. And after a while he just let the drums stand there in the corner and gather dust for the cleaning woman. He went swimming.

Louie called. "Ain't been seein you around much, man. What's happening, your part of the world?"

"I'm coastin'," Baby said.

"Well, Markson called. He wants to know about a date and a contract for the return bout. Wants you and me to come down tomorrow——"

"I thought we got it straight about me and fighting," Baby said. "There's nothin to talk about with Markson or anybody. That's that, far as I'm concerned."

"All right, now, just take it easy," Louie said. "I'll stall him off. Just take it easy. And lemme see you

one of these days soon, okay? You don't have to retire from me."

"Okay," Baby said.

But he didn't mean it.

And then one warm July evening—it was two days after Analee's wedding and the party Baby had thrown for her and her big black numbers-racketeer of a husband and the grand climax when she took off her shoe and made her groom drink champagne out of it—he sat in the car, alone, and wanted to go somewhere but didn't know where he wanted to go. And started downtown with a hollowness he'd known for months compelling him, steering him on.

People stopping to watch his red car go by. Somebody waving to him from the pavement; he didn't know who; he waved in reply.

He parked the car and went up the three steps, into the vestibule, with all the assurance of a man really calling on someone. He remembered where her nameplate and mailbox were—fourth bell from the left—but there was a new name now. *Glidden*. That woman she'd talked about, the one she'd introduced him to once at a party,—wasn't her name Glidden or something?

Knowing what it was he wanted and had wanted all along, he pressed the bell and when he got the answering buzz, started up the stairs. A blond man answered the door. A blond white man with a small neat blond moustache, who just stood and looked at Baby out of a white man's small blue eyes that had already suffered too many drinks this evening.

"I'm a friend of Miss Brendan's," Baby said.

"Why, Miss Brendan's dead," the man said. "We——"

"Charlie! I thought you'd been seduced along the way," a woman called from the kitchen. She came out carrying a big wooden salad fork and wearing slacks and sweater and a bright, bright smile that retreated into a thin face past thirty-five when she saw Baby. "Oh, I thought you were someone else. . . . Aren't you Baby James?"

"That's right. You're Miss Glidden, aren't you?"

"Yes—we met, remember? Bert, this was a friend of Laine's. He's a boxer."

"You mean he's the Middleweight Champion of the World," Bert said authoritatively, brightening with recognition. "I was just reading that piece in *Look* about you last night."

"We were expecting someone for dinner," Lillian said, "and I thought it was he. Won't you sit down? You can see that a lot of the stuff here was Laine's—her mother just hasn't done anything about taking it yet."

"That's her rug, too," Lillian chattered on out of embarrassment and three or four cocktails. "At first I hesitated about taking the apartment—there seemed to be something *wrong* about it—my taking it, I mean—but that place of mine was so noisy, and then I thought we all have to live with the fact of her death one way or the other and so . . ." She showed him a helpless hand. "You knew she was dead, didn't you?"

"I read about it in the paper," Baby said, making no move to sit down. "I can only stay a minute. I came up here to get something she gave me—if it's still around."

"Oh really? Well, of course." Lillian noticed the fork she was carrying and found it necessary to explain, "I

was mixing the salad for dinner. . . . What was it you came for?"

"It was a picture she made," Baby said. "Picture of me."

"Well, it ought to be around. I put all her paintings over here until her mother decides what she wants to do about them." Her voice was muffled as she shuffled things around in the closet. "This one?"

She came out holding up a painting a little dusty now, the streaks of blood he stood behind not so bright anymore, his face dimmer.

"That's it."

"Why, it's a *marvellous* painting," the blond man broke in with his tenor lisp. "The montage technique. It's quite—"

"Take it," Lillian said, "if she gave it to you. It looks as though it ought to be yours."

"I want to look through *all* of them," the blond man, who somehow stood outside their conversation, was saying. "I had no *idea* she was that good."

"Why, she was a wonderful painter," Lillian Glidden said defensively. "I always told you that. I'd like to arrange a show somewhere of her work—if her mother has no objections. Will you let me borrow this from you if I do arrange a show?" she asked Baby. "And why don't you sit down and have a drink with us?"

"If boxers——" The blond man was beginning with an ingratiating smile, but Baby was already talking: "Thanks a lot, but I gotta go. Sure you can borrow it—any time you need it."

"Shall I wrap it for you? Put some paper around it?"

"I got the car," he said.

He gave her his address which she wrote down on a pad by the phone, accepted the slim moist hand the infatuated blond man slipped into his, and left—hearing after the door had closed the blond man's penetrating voice, "But I never knew Laine Brendan knew *him*. How in the world did *they* ever get to know . . ."

He went on down the stairs, the picture under his arm, the apartment behind him now—at least a mile with every step he took, with every traffic light he passed as he headed the car crosstown toward the Drive.

When he got back to his place he propped the picture on the mantel—the same picture he'd first seen five months ago. The same crossed spotlights, the same puzzle of squares, the same bars of blood imprisoning a man's face. But he could look at it now.

That was the difference.

He could look at it and say it looked like a true copy—of himself and every man he'd ever faced. He could say it even if there wasn't much he could do about it except say it and die.

Or live.

When he phoned, Winnie answered. She told him Louie had been trying to get him all evening, he just stepped out the door, wait a minute maybe she could catch him.

"You're a hard man to get hold of these days," Louie said. "I tried to get you, they want you to be a guest star on TV *Toast of the Town*—big deal. It's next Sunday."

"Okay," Baby said. "Tell em I'll be there."

"I'll tell em. How are you? Why don't you ever come around?"

"I'll be a found more now," Baby said. "What I called to tell you—you can set up the Aldi fight. If he wants it he can have it."

"Man, that's the way I like to hear you talk. You're makin sense now. I told you——"

"I'll drop around and see you tomorrow morning at the office. Okay?"

"Come on over to the apartment right now," Louie said. He was shouting into the phone he was so excited. "Or I'll come over there. We got a lot to talk about."

"Tomorrow's better," Baby told him. "I'll come over tomorrow morning, nine or so."

"I'll be there at nine on the dot waiting for you." Louie paused. His voice was different when he asked, "How are you feeling these days, Baby?"

"I'm feelin all right."

"Up to standard?"

"I'll live," Baby said.

THE END

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